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PREFACE

THE increase in popularity of the one-act play during the last few years has been extraordinary, especially when it is remembered that the professional theatre has had little or nothing to do with it. The professional theatre, indeed, nearly killed the one-act play when it discarded the curtain-raiser. To the amateurs, therefore, must go the credit for having retained faith in this form of drama, and for having helped it to develop from its former sketchy self into a serious contribution to the theatre.

This growth in numbers and esteem is largely due to the drama festivals, which have seized hold on the imagination and hopes of all kinds of amateur groups. Of recent years the interest at the festivals has been strongly centred on original works. Few festivals are now without a prize or trophy for the best unpublished play, and as the entries in this category must be *performed* before the adjudicators it is certain that the winners must be more than good on paper; they must *act* well. For this reason the discriminating reader and the committee in search of an actable play can take heart in studying the following collection.

The plays in this volume are not, of course, the *only* ones that have won premier awards; but they represent successes at some of the most important festivals—not one of less than a week's duration—and have been adjudicated upon by such experienced judges as M. Sterling MacKinlay, John Fernald, Frank Sladen-Smith, Martin Browne, and John Bourne.

While it is not the purpose here to review the plays, it can be said of the first performances that *Our Lad* deeply

moved the audience; that *Men are Missing* lent itself to characterization and the stage picture; and that *Unknown Dimension* made an adjudicator change his mind after favouring another play. *Twentieth-century Lullaby* had more performances than any other play in the British Drama League's National Festival of 1936, and reached the final at the Old Vic. According to the Press, *Cupid Rampant* "swept the audience by storm." The adjudicator said, "It is probably too witty and intelligent for most revues." *The Willing Spirit* won the full approval of a Tyneside audience, which had reason to understand its tragic truth; and *The Flaw* easily won against strong competition at Welwyn, where audiences are exceptionally critical and adjudication is severe. *Husbands Supplied* created something of a sensation at Harrogate, where its local author did not reveal his identity until after the award, probably knowing that farces are a difficult problem in spa towns.

After studying the plays some readers may consider that the adjudicators were wrong; some people *always* think that adjudicators are wrong. But the fact remains that these plays won—and the chances, therefore, are that they may win again. In any case, they afford a criterion of festival requirements.

H. S. Q.

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Falkland L. Cary

J. N. Fletcher
1939.

No performance or public reading of any of the plays in this book may be given without the permission of the authors' agents, named in each case.

CUPID RAMPANT

turn into ridicule by overdoing liberalism
A CARICATURE

By PERCY CORRY

Prize-winning play Blackpool Festival 1935

Adjudicator: F. SLADEN-SMITH

Copyright 1935 in Great Britain and the United States by
Percy Corry

CHARACTERS

AN UNMARRIED FEMALE
THE SERGEANT-REGISTRAR
AN ORDERLY
AN UNMARRIED MALE
THE CONTROLLER OF THE

CRÈCHE
nursery

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE costumes may be varied in colour or design to suit the particular opportunities or restrictions of the producer. The most effective presentation might be obtained by using a complete scheme of black and white for setting and costumes. It is important, however, that care should be taken to avoid conveying the impression that the satire is directed against the wearers of any particular colour of nationalist or factional shirt.

As the purpose of this extravagant comedy is to study a modern tendency in freakish fashion, the producer would be quite justified in dressing his actors in multicoloured and fantastic costumes.

All applications regarding performances of this play must be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York.

God of Love
by 1970
CUPID RAMPANT

Amplified
As the curtain rises the orchestra should play

sweetly
[Softly and melodiously] Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves. . . .

harshly
[Slowly and stridently] Britons . . . never . . . never . . .
NEV-ER . . . SHALL . . . BE . . . SLAVES.

The scene is the office of the SERGEANT-REGISTRAR—a worthy pillar of the corporate state of the future. How far in the future is problematic, but it may be assumed that the time is an afternoon in the summer of 1970. The room, which is probably on the fifteenth story, is entered by a single door in the centre of the right wall. Through a metal-framed, single-paned window occupying the greater part of the back wall may be seen the sun-lit skyscrapers, the flat roofs of which support impressive aerial signals and the hangars in which the autogiros of the period are garaged.

The room and its furnishings convey the impression of hard, bright efficiency and a severity that has eschewed all demoralizing curves. A long, narrow table-desk occupies the centre of the room. The seats—armless compromises between chair and stool—suggest utility rather than comfort. On the table is a televisor, the glass screen of which illuminates and flickers when in use.

Seated down left is a female of twenty—a perfect physical specimen of the period. As the equality of the sexes is well established, and there is no longer any need for the attractive adornment of woman, she—and every other member of the cast—will probably wear close-fitting high boots with zip fasteners,

riding-breeches, tunic or shirt, belt, and beret. Her armlet is inscribed 87654 U.F. By her left side is a leather wallet containing her documents. At the moment the female is engrossed in a small, ancient-looking book, and does not notice the entry of a tall, well-built, and rather ferocious-looking man. His armlet bears three inverted chevrons and the letters S.R. He marches into the room, halts near the table, and raises his arm in salute. The girl does not move or take any notice of the SERGEANT-REGISTRAR, who raps loudly on the table, and remains standing at the salute. She looks up, startled but uncertain.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

What is it? Oh, I see. . . . Yes, of course. . . .

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*outraged*]

WOMAN!

UNMARRIED FEMALE [*springing to the salute in confusion*]

I beg your pardon, sir. You see, I'm a school-teacher, and I——

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Silence!

UNMARRIED FEMALE [*meekly*]

Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

What were you reading?

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Well, sir. . . . It was—it was a book.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Really? What book?

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Just a book that some one gave me, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Let me see it.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

It isn't my book really. It was——

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Give it to me! [Reluctantly she hands him the book.]
What rubbish is this? Poetry! *The Poems of Shelley!*
[Snorts.] A prohibited author, I suppose?

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I . . . I don't know, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*opening a massive book on his desk*]

Let me see. P, Q, R, S . . . S . . . Shakespeare . . .
Shaw . . . Sheridan. Ah, yes, here we are. "Shelley,
P.B., a decadent poet of the nineteenth century, rebel-
lious spirit, very pernicious; all books containing his
work confiscated and burned in Trafalgar Square on
November 5th, 1943, at the public festival of St Guy."
H'm. You're a teacher, you say?

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Yes, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Then there's no excuse. You must have known this to
be a forbidden book.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I'm sorry, sir, but, you see——

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Silence! This book will be sent to the National Incine-
rator, and the offence reported to the commandant of
your new corps.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

My new corps? *division of army.*

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes. You are to be drafted *draft* to the Matrimonial Corps. *married*

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I thought that might be the reason I had to report. That

was why I was reading the poetry, sir. I thought it might tell me something about . . . about love.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Love? Love? What has love to do with matrimony?

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I don't know, sir, but——

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Nothing whatever. That superstition was exploded years ago. Read your history books.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I have; but I thought——

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Well, don't. You aren't expected to think. You need only do as you're told.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Yes, sir.

[There is a knock at the door, followed by the entry of the ORDERLY. He is a man of refined speech and cultured manner. He salutes in a rather perfunctory manner, and comports himself generally with a kind of bland detachment which indicates that although he complies strictly with the requirements of his superiors, he does so with mental reservations. His armlet is marked O. 3293.]

ORDERLY

Excuse me, Sergeant.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

What the hell do you want?

ORDERLY *[with cheerful politeness]*

I? Nothing, Sergeant, thank you. My every want is well supplied.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

You fool! Why do you——

ORDERLY [*mildly reproachful*]

Sergeant . . . allow me. I have a message.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Then spit it out—and get out.

ORDERLY

Certainly. [*Adopting a pseudo-official manner*] The Chief Inspector of Registry requires your presence in his office immediately.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*rising hastily*]

Why couldn't you say so at first? What did he say?

ORDERLY

Do you want his precise words?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

What do you mean?

ORDERLY

You asked what he said. Do you want his precise words—or an expurgated version?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

What did he say?

ORDERLY

He said—or, to be quite exact, he roared, "Tell that blasted idiot of a sergeant I want him at once." I knew he must mean you.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*with a blustering attempt to retain his dignity*]

Silence! I'll deal with you later. [*Takes the list from the table and gives it to the ORDERLY.*] Here's the list of M.C. recruits. Have them sent up in that order.

ORDERLY

Yes, Sergeant. [*He opens the door politely for the SERGEANT, and is about to pass out after him when he turns to the girl.*] Excuse me, is your number 76543?

UNMARRIED FEMALE

No, sir. I'm 87654.

ORDERLY [*glancing at her armlet*]

Ah, yes, of course. 76543 is the male recruit. Apparently he hasn't arrived?

UNMARRIED FEMALE

No, sir.

ORDERLY [*with a sympathetic smile*]

You really mustn't call me 'sir.' I'm only the Orderly here. As a matter of fact, I'm S.D. Class.

UNMARRIED FEMALE [*awestricken*]

S.D.!

ORDERLY

Yes. Socially defective, you know. I was regraded by the last Mass Psychology Board S.D.2.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I thought all the S.D. Class were isolated.

ORDERLY

Oh, dear, no! Only the dangerous cases.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

What's the matter with you?

ORDERLY

Distorted mental perspective.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

How dreadful!

ORDERLY

Well, of course, I don't find it so. I'm also under special observation for six months. They suspect enlargement of the sense of humour.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

What will they do?

ORDERLY

Probably make me a dramatic critic. If that doesn't cure me I suppose I shall be isolated or sterilized.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Would they really do that?

ORDERLY

Quite likely. That's what happened to a fellow who was with me in the Kindergarten Battalion.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Do you know anything about the Matrimonial Corps?

ORDERLY

Not very much. Being S.D., I'm excluded.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

You're lucky. I wish I were.

ORDERLY

Don't worry. It might turn out all right. Matrimony is a lottery. You might be lucky. Some people seem to like it.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I don't see how they can.

ORDERLY

Oh, yes, I assure you. In fact, I have heard of people signing on for extended service.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I've never heard that. [*Pause.*] I say, hadn't you better go?

ORDERLY [*smiling reassuringly*]

I'm not dangerous.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

It isn't that. The Sergeant might come back. You'd get into trouble.

ORDERLY

Don't worry. I can manage him. But I think I'll go. I can't stand the Controller. She'll be here any minute.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

The Controller?

ORDERLY

Controller of the Crèche. She's present at all the M.C. enrolments. She isn't necessary, you know; but she thinks she is, poor dear.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

What is she like?

ORDERLY

A garrulous gorgon! Quite a nasty piece of work—but amusing at times. Makes the poor old Sergeant toe the line. [*The SERGEANT enters, obviously very much put out.*]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

What was that you said?

ORDERLY

Ah, that you, Sergeant? I was just warning this young recruit that you were a bit of a terror, and made us toe the line.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

I'll toe something else if you don't get out.

ORDERLY

You must have your little joke, Sergeant. [*The SERGEANT-REGISTRAR growls threateningly.*] And, by the way, this first male recruit hasn't reported yet.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

What's his number?

ORDERLY [*consulting his list*]

Let me see . . . 76543.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

If he isn't here by the time I'm ready send the next male up, and have 76543 put under arrest when he does arrive.

ORDERLY

H'm! That's rather drastic, Sergeant. Don't you think——

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Never mind what I think. You're here to obey orders.

ORDERLY

Oh, very well. [*Stops at door and turns.*] The Controller hasn't arrived, so you can't start yet.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Get outside, or I'll throw you out.

ORDERLY

Would you like me to arrest the Controller as well?

[*The SERGEANT-REGISTRAR angrily pushes back his chair, but the ORDERLY quickly retreats. There are three sharp buzzes from the televisor. The SERGEANT-REGISTRAR snaps on the switch.*]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Well, man, what are you grinning for? What do you want?

VOICE

Number 76543 just reported, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

All right. Make him fill up a Late Arrival Report, and send him up. Tell him to make it snappy.

VOICE

Yes, sir. [*The SERGEANT-REGISTRAR switches off.*]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*to the UNMARRIED FEMALE*]

Let me have your documents.

UNMARRIED FEMALE [*taking them from the wallet and dumping them on the table*]

Here, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*roaring*]

Don't you know yet how to present documents?

UNMARRIED FEMALE [*hastily recovering them*]

Sorry, sir. [*She resumes her original position at attention, steps forward briskly until level with the end of the table, halts, turns right, steps forward to the table, and stands rigidly to attention as she smartly presents each document singly.*]

Birth Certificate.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*checking each document as presented*]

Birth Certificate.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Existence Licence.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Existence Licence.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Identity Certificate.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Identity Certificate.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Empire Passport.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Empire Passport.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Teacher's Certificate.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Teacher's Certificate.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Social History Record.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Social History Record.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

Medical History Record.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Medical History Record. H'm! All right. As you were.

[She resumes her original position by the same method. The ORDERLY opens the door to admit a young man of twenty. His armlet bears the number 76543 U.M.]

ORDERLY

Number 76543 U.M.

[Exit. The UNMARRIED MALE enters smartly, marching and turning with great precision. He halts opposite the UNMARRIED FEMALE, and stands at the salute.]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR *[returning salute]*

You're six minutes late.

UNMARRIED MALE

Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. There was a breakdown on——

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

You should have started earlier.

UNMARRIED MALE

Only just left duty at the airport, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

All right. Don't argue. Your documents.

UNMARRIED MALE

Yes, sir. *[He smartly executes the correct movements, and presents the documents singly.]* Birth certificate.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR *[checking, as before]*

Birth Certificate.

UNMARRIED MALE

Existence Licence.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Existence Licence.

UNMARRIED MALE

Identity Certificate.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Identity Certificate.

UNMARRIED MALE

World Passport.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

World Passport.

UNMARRIED MALE

Occupational Record.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Occupational Record.

UNMARRIED MALE

Military Training Certificate.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Military Training Certificate.

UNMARRIED MALE

Social History Record.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Social History Record.

UNMARRIED MALE

Medical History Record.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Medical History Record. All right. As you were.
*[The UNMARRIED MALE resumes his original position. The
 SERGEANT-REGISTRAR glances at the papers.]* I see you're a
 deck steward.

UNMARRIED MALE

Yes, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

On what?

UNMARRIED MALE

The *Mollison Magna*, sir. London to Melbourne non-stop, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

That means you're only home one night in five?

UNMARRIED MALE

Yes, sir. Two days out and two back.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR.

Yes. Well, you're to be drafted to the Matrimonial Corps. During your seven years with the colours you will be transferred to a local service. Let me see. [*Consults a book.*] Yes, London—Cairo. You'll be home every night then.

UNMARRIED MALE

Yes, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

If you do your duty.

UNMARRIED MALE [*with a quick glance at the UNMARRIED FEMALE*]

Er . . . yes, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Eh? You'll be drummed out of the corps if you don't. [*He rises and walks to the front of the table, with a large document in his hand.*] Party . . . fall in! [*They fall in, facing the SERGEANT, and obey his orders with commendable slickness.*] 'Shun! From the right . . . number!

UNMARRIED FEMALE

One.

UNMARRIED MALE

Two.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Stand at . . . ease! 'Shun! Number one . . . left turn!

. . . Number two . . . right turn! Party . . . two paces step back . . . march! Attend to the following. [*Reads.*]

"Proclamation by his Extreme Highness the Dictator of the British Empire.

"Whereas I have decreed that the population of the Empire shall be increased; and

"Whereas I have decided that the increase shall be accelerated:

"It is hereby further decreed that all one hundred per cent. pure British, sane, and healthy persons who have attained the age of twenty years shall be drafted forthwith to the Matrimonial Corps. They will serve the usual seven years with the colours and five in reserve, or such other periods as may be hereafter decreed. Signed: Rufus Blanco Raven Hotair."

[*All three raise their arms in salute and say, "Hail, Hotair!" The televisior buzzes.*]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Stand at ease! [*He crosses to the televisior and switches it on.*] Well, what is it?

VOICE

The Controller of the Crèche is on her way up, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Damnation! All right. [*Switches off and calls out loudly:*] Orderly!

ORDERLY [*entering*]

The Controller arriving?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes. She's on her way up. Stand by to announce her. Give her the usual musical honours.

ORDERLY [*grinning, as he crosses to televisior*]

You'll get it in the neck. I told you not to do anything until she arrived. [*Switches on, and speaks into televisior.*] Is that Musical Relays?

FEMININE VOICE

Yes. Who's that?

ORDERLY

Extension 713, Room 91, Floor 15. I want a Controllers' Salute immediately, please.

FEMININE VOICE

O.K.

ORDERLY [*as the CONTROLLER's voice is heard off*]

Here she comes. Leave it to me, Sergeant; I'll see you through.

[*He crosses to the door in readiness to announce the CONTROLLER. The fanfare commences.*]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Party . . . 'shun!

[*The SERGEANT takes his position behind the table near the left corner, facing the door. The man and the woman stand facing each other down-stage, four paces apart.*]

ORDERLY [*announcing*]

Her Excellency the Controller of the Crèche.

[*The CONTROLLER marches in with full consciousness of her importance. The ORDERLY follows, and takes up his position at the corner of the table opposite to the SERGEANT and facing him. The CONTROLLER marches to a position dead centre at the back, turns to face the audience; as she does so the SERGEANT roars out the command.*]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Party . . . salute!

[*All four, moving in strict unison, one . . . two . . . three . . ., turn to face the CONTROLLER, and shoot out their arms in salute. As the fanfare concludes the CONTROLLER, who has returned the salute,*

drops her arm, and the SERGEANT again shouts the command.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

As you . . . were!

[All four drop their arms and turn back to their previous positions—one . . . two . . . three.]

[The CONTROLLER is a stalwart woman of about forty-five, of commanding bearing and speech. She has not acquired her exalted status through any innate merit or ability, but by reason of a thick-skinned insensibility to rebuffs. In less enlightened days she would have been an inept chairman of at least seven charitable committees, a dramatic society, a tennis club, and a political association, and would have been thoroughly detested but consistently re-elected by all of them. Her armlet is a rather ornate affair, bearing the design of a child's head in a laurel-wreath, with a letter C on each side.]

CONTROLLER *[stepping forward, as the salute concludes]*
Sergeant!

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Your Excellency!

CONTROLLER

Get me the Controller of the Metropolitan Transport.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency. *[Turning to ORDERLY]* Get the Controller of Metropolitan Transport, and put him through here.

ORDERLY

Yes, Sergeant.

[Exit.]

CONTROLLER

Now. These the M.C. recruits?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Good. Their documents?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Here, your Excellency. All presented and correct.

CONTROLLER

Do they know why they're here?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Well, your Excellency . . . it's like this. You were——

CONTROLLER

Can't you answer a simple question? Do they know, or don't they?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency. They know all right.

CONTROLLER

Why couldn't you say so at first? You men are all alike. What would happen to the Empire if women didn't hold some of the key positions I can't imagine.

[The televisor buzzes. She switches on.]

VOICE

His Excellency the Controller of Metropolitan Transport.

[The light flickers as he is put through.]

CONTROLLER

Ah! That you, Hoskins?

VOICE

Yes. Who d'you think it is? Can't you see?

CONTROLLER

No, I can't see. It's a very bad connexion. You're dithering about like a ballet-dancer.

VOICE

Well, what do you want me for?

CONTROLLER

I've a serious complaint to make. There's just been

another breakdown on those wretched express pavements.

VOICE

I know all about it. It's not our fault. That damned grid failed again. Anyhow, what's it got to do with you?

CONTROLLER

It has a lot to do with me. I was on my way to H.Q. for a most important ceremony when there was a complete stoppage for ten minutes. Result: I'm late, and the whole ceremony has had to be delayed.

[The SERGEANT-REGISTRAR glances at her uneasily.]

VOICE

It can't be helped. You shouldn't wait till the last minute.

CONTROLLER

Last minute, indeed! My time is too important to be wasted in making allowance for your breakdowns. It's always the same. Your department is incompetent . . . absolutely incompetent. I shall report you to the Efficiency Council. Every time I use the beastly pavements they break down.

VOICE

Yes . . . I expect that's the reason. Why don't you keep off 'em? *[The screen darkens as he switches off.]*

CONTROLLER

Well . . . well, I'm . . . Sergeant!

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Your Excellency?

CONTROLLER

Before I leave see that I have a Secret and Confidential Complaint form—a large one.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency.

[The ORDERLY enters.]

ORDERLY

Excuse me, Sergeant. I have a message for her Extreme Shyness.

CONTROLLER

What's that? What's that?

ORDERLY [*urbanely*]

I said I had a message for your Highness. . . . I beg your pardon—I mean your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Message? From whom?

ORDERLY

The Deputy Commandant. He instructed me to explain that to prevent inconvenience through your unfortunate late arrival he ordered the Sergeant-Registrar to carry on with the ceremonies in your absence. He said he was sure you would approve of his action.

CONTROLLER [*bridling*]

Oh, did he? I'll speak to him.

[She stretches her hand towards the televisor.]

ORDERLY [*intervening hastily*]

I'm afraid the Deputy Commandant has gone out, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER [*dubiously*]

Ah! All right. Dismiss!

ORDERLY

Thank you, your Excellency.

[He gives the SERGEANT a broad grin and a significant wink as he turns and marches out. The SERGEANT is rather nonplussed by the man's effrontery.]

CONTROLLER

Interfering busybody. [*To the SERGEANT-REGISTRAR*]
Why on earth couldn't you tell me that at first?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

I didn't think of it, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

What do you mean?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*confused*]

Well, your Excellency, I mean . . . er . . . orders are orders.

CONTROLLER

I know that, you fool. I wish people would look after their own affairs and not interfere with mine. All right. How far have you got?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Just read the proclamation, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Very well. We'll carry on from there.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*handing her the book, very relieved*]

Yes, your Excellency. [*Turning to couple*] Party . . . fall in! 'Shun! Number one . . . left turn! Number two . . . right turn! Two paces step back . . . march!

[This quite unnecessary movement, of course, takes them back to the position from which they started.]

CONTROLLER [*standing in front of the table and reading from the book with unctious pomposity*]

"You are shortly to be members of a glorious corps, serving a glorious cause. See to it that you serve faithfully and well. Put aside all thought of self. Remember always the imperishable traditions of your race. Let your perpetual precept be: 'Each for all and all for the Empire.'"

UNMARRIED FEMALE

UNMARRIED MALE

Each for all and all for the Empire.

CONTROLLER

Repeat after me together, raising the right hand: I solemnly swear . . .

UNMARRIED FEMALE

UNMARRIED MALE

I solemnly swear . . .

CONTROLLER

. . . that I will faithfully serve the State . . .

UNMARRIED FEMALE

UNMARRIED MALE

. . . that I will faithfully serve the State . . .

CONTROLLER

. . . and that I will honour and obey . . .

UNMARRIED FEMALE

UNMARRIED MALE

. . . and that I will honour and obey . . .

CONTROLLER

. . . his Extreme Highness the Dictator.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

UNMARRIED MALE

. . . his Extreme Highness the Dictator.

ALL [*saluting*]

Hail Hotair!

CONTROLLER [*to the UNMARRIED FEMALE*]

Repeat the fourteenth stanza from your *Citizens' Book of Purified Verse*.

UNMARRIED FEMALE [*standing rigidly and reciting the verse with stilted intonation and emphasis*]

"Life is a privilege, like some rare rose
The mysteries of the human mind unclose.
What marvels lie in earth and air and sea!
What stores of knowledge wait our opening key!
What sunny roads of happiness lead out
Beyond the realms of indolence and doubt!
And what large pleasures smile upon and bless
The busy avenues of usefulness!"

CONTROLLER [*to the UNMARRIED MALE*]

Repeat the eighteenth stanza from your *Selected Poems of Power and Purpose*.

UNMARRIED MALE [*reciting similarly*]

“Cease wondering why you came.

Stop looking for faults and flaws.

Rise up to-day in your pride and say,

‘I am part of the First Great Cause.’

However full the world,

There is room for an earnest man;

It had need of me or I would not be:

I belong to the Five-Year Plan.”

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*at a nod from the CONTROLLER*]

One pace step forward . . . march! [*They obey.*] Clasp arms! [*They clasp arms, Roman fashion.*]

CONTROLLER [*to the UNMARRIED FEMALE*]

Say after me: I take you . . .

UNMARRIED FEMALE

I take you . . .

CONTROLLER

. . . Number 76543 . . .

UNMARRIED FEMALE

. . . Number 76543

CONTROLLER

. . . to be my legal partner . . .

UNMARRIED FEMALE

. . . to be my legal partner . . .

CONTROLLER

. . . so long as you are strong, effective, . . .

UNMARRIED FEMALE

. . . so long as you are strong, effective, . . .

CONTROLLER

. . . and in good health . . .

UNMARRIED FEMALE

... and in good health ...

CONTROLLER

... until Dictator's decree ...

UNMARRIED FEMALE

... until Dictator's decree ...

CONTROLLER

... or death shall us part.

UNMARRIED FEMALE

... or death shall us part.

CONTROLLER [*to the UNMARRIED MALE*]

Say after me: I take you ...

UNMARRIED MALE

I take you ...

CONTROLLER

... Number 87654 ...

UNMARRIED MALE

... Number 87654 ...

CONTROLLER

... to be my legal partner ...

UNMARRIED MALE

... to be my legal partner ...

CONTROLLER

... so long as you are productive ...

UNMARRIED MALE

... so long as you are productive ...

CONTROLLER

... and in good health ...

UNMARRIED MALE

... and in good health ...

CONTROLLER

... until Dictator's decree ...

UNMARRIED MALE

. . . until Dictator's decree . . .

CONTROLLER

. . . or death shall us part.

UNMARRIED MALE

. . . or death shall us part.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

As you were. [*They unclasp arms.*] Two paces step back . . . march!

[*When they have resumed their positions the CONTROLLER regards them solemnly, and reads impressively from her book.*]

CONTROLLER

"You are chosen for a glorious destiny. It is your privilege to perpetuate the most exalted of the human race. Your union and offspring will be glorified by Service and sanctified by the State. Be fruitful . . . and multiply."

MARRIED COUPLE

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER [*to the woman*]

You understand that at the age of three months each child is taken away from its parents and enrolled in the Cradle Corps?

WOMAN

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

All right. [*To man*] Do you know how to kiss?

MAN

No, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

No? Ah . . . Sergeant . . . er . . . carry on!

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency. [*The CONTROLLER moves away, and he takes her place. He addresses the man.*] Listen. Your partner stands firm. On the command 'one' you march forward and halt opposite your partner; on the command 'two' you bend forward from the waist; on the command 'three' you place your lips against those of your partner. Understand?

MAN

Yes, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*with parade-ground flourish*]

Marriage party . . . kiss by numbers. One . . . two . . . wait for it . . . three! . . . Hold it! . . . As you were. [*They break away, and the man paces backward to his original position. They regard each other with a slightly self-conscious interest.*] Stand at . . . ease!

[*He looks at the CONTROLLER for further instructions, but she is regarding the man with a look of puzzled interest. She crosses to him.*]

CONTROLLER

To which company of the Cradle Corps did you belong?

MAN

The Brown-eyed Infantry, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Where were you stationed?

MAN

In the Fifty-third Crèche, according to my documents.

CONTROLLER

Ha! And your mother?

MAN [*parrot-like*]

I know no mother but my mother country.

CONTROLLER

Yes, yes, I know all about that. Do you know who your father was?

MAN

I know no father but the Fatherland.

CONTROLLER [*impatiently*]

Sergeant, give me his documents.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Here, your Excellency.

[He hands them to her at the table.]

CONTROLLER [*examining them hastily*]

I knew it! [*With majestic anger*] Why has this man been called up?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

H.Q. instructions, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Rubbish, man! [*Flourishing one of the documents*] Don't you see he belongs to the Star Class?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR [*stupefied*]

Star Class, your Excellency?

CONTROLLER

Yes, Star Class, you fool! Don't you know that for a Star Class enrolment you must have an order signed by the Dictator personally?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Have you got one?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

No, your Excellency. I didn't notice he was starred. There must have been a mistake.

CONTROLLER

Mistake! Of course there's been a mistake. What do you think you're here for? To find mistakes! Consider yourself under arrest.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Mistake, indeed! The marriage will have to be cancelled. This man is *my son*! [*Sensation. The SERGEANT wilts visibly; the girl looks horror-stricken; the man remains impassive.*] Now do you realize what you've done? Married a starred recruit . . . my son . . . to this . . . [*looking at the girl scornfully*] . . . to this nondescript female!

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

I obey orders, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

You will, in future. I'll have you reduced to the ranks and disgraced. Where are this woman's documents?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Here, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER [*examining them*]

Send for her Pedigree Docket.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency. [*He rings the bell on the table.*]

CONTROLLER

Not that it is likely to be of much use. You've only to look at her to see that her lineage is commonplace.

[*The ORDERLY enters.*]

ORDERLY

Your Excellency rang?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Bring the Pedigree Docket of Number 87654 U.F.

CONTROLLER [*reading from the Birth Certificate*]

Reference number X 41963 F.C. . . . and be quick with it.

ORDERLY

Certainly, your Excellency.

[Exit unhurriedly.]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

I'm sorry, your Excellency, but the——

CONTROLLER

Silence! You can reserve your excuses for the court martial. [*The SERGEANT-REGISTRAR subsides sulkily; the CONTROLLER crosses to the man.*] You heard what I said?

MAN

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

And do you understand you are starred because you are my son?

MAN

No, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Well, you are. Why didn't you object when you were called up?

MAN

I obey orders, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Stuff! Why do you think I took the trouble to have you starred?

MAN

I don't know, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Because it gives me the right to decide whom you shall have for a partner. And I intend to exercise that right. Do you understand?

MAN

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

So far your pedigree has shown constant progress. Your great-grandfather was a plumber's mate; your grandfather was Superintendent of the National Waterworks; your father was Controller of the Meteorological Corps. I shall not allow that record to be ruined.

[The ORDERLY enters with a docket.]

ORDERLY

The Pedigree Docket, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Give it to me. *[She snatches it from him and looks at it.]*
This is in code!

ORDERLY

Naturally, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Then get me a translation immediately.

ORDERLY

I can translate it verbally, if your Excellency wishes.

CONTROLLER

Do you know the code?

ORDERLY *[with a significant smile]*

I know all the codes, your Excellency. I find it most useful.

CONTROLLER

All right. Go ahead.

ORDERLY *[reading]*

Pedigree Docket of Number 876——

CONTROLLER *[impatiently]*

I don't want the trimmings. What rank was her father?

ORDERLY

Assistant Superintendent of Adolescent Education.

CONTROLLER

And her mother?

ORDERLY

Deputy Inspector of State Factories.

CONTROLLER [*agreeably surprised*]

Ah! H'm!

ORDERLY [*with studied casualness*]

I see that her paternal great-grandfather was the former Viscount Hogwash, "who relinquished his title to become the first Panjandrum of Empire Propaganda."

CONTROLLER [*excitedly*]

What's that? Let me see. [*Snatches the docket from him again.*] Viscount?

ORDERLY

It's still in code, your Excellency. Allow me. [*Leans over.*] That's the code for 'Viscount' . . . 'half a crown'!

CONTROLLER [*fatuously complacent*]

Ha! Yes . . . yes, of course. Viscount! Well, well. [*She crosses to the woman, and looks her over with critical approval.*] Ah, yes, there is a certain something about her. Yes. [*Returns to the table.*] The certificate of allotment, Sergeant.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Here, your Excellency.

[*He puts the open book of certificates before her.*]

CONTROLLER [*taking up a pen from the table*]

I am signing it—but I shall require a detailed explanation why the regulations were not complied with.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Very good, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

The results of your neglect might have been disastrous . . . most disastrous.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

But the M.C. recruits lists were supplied by the Record Office, and——

CONTROLLER

That will do. Don't argue. Let me have the full details on a Misdemeanour Report form. And see that all the documents connected with this couple are properly starred.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

And don't let such a mistake occur again. I shall take as lenient a view as possible. [*Signs the certificate with a flourish.*] The marriage will stand. I withdraw my objections. Where's that man?

ORDERLY [*stepping forward*]

Do you mean me, your Excellency?

CONTROLLER

I do. Make an exact translation of this docket, and let me have it.

ORDERLY

Certainly, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER [*looking at him approvingly*]

You seem to be quite smart. Why are you doing this job?

ORDERLY

Somebody must keep things running smoothly.

CONTROLLER

Hoping for promotion, perhaps?

ORDERLY

Not seriously, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Why not?

ORDERLY

My chief limitation is that I'm not eligible, your Excellency. I'm S.D. Class.

CONTROLLER

S.D.! Dear, dear. What are your disqualifications?

ORDERLY

A volatile nature . . . and an Irish grandfather.

CONTROLLER

Ah! Very unfortunate afflictions. Most unfortunate. Sergeant!

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency?

CONTROLLER

Is the Controller of Amusements in the building?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Couldn't say, your Excellency. I'll inquire.

ORDERLY

I believe she is having tea in the Controllers' lounge.

CONTROLLER

Tea? Ah, yes! I must see her at once. Sergeant, just finish off this couple and carry on with the others. I shall be back shortly.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Very good, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

How many recruits are there to-day?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Twenty couples, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER

Have they all reported?

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency. They are all waiting in Number Fifteen Lecture Hall.

ORDERLY

Absorbing nourishment for their immature minds.

CONTROLLER

What's that? What's that?

ORDERLY

They are listening to a Propaganda Headquarters' relay.
The Ethics of Materialism, I believe.

CONTROLLER

H'm! All right. Carry on, Sergeant. When I come back I'll take them in batches of six.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Yes, your Excellency.

CONTROLLER [*standing in front of the woman and regarding her with considerable satisfaction*]

A viscount, eh? Excellent.

ORDERLY

Perhaps your Excellency would like to have the translation at once. Shall I send it to the lounge?

CONTROLLER

What's that? Y'yes. . . . Do that. [*She is about to leave, but stops at the door and turns.*] No, Orderly, you needn't send it. [*She crosses to him and regards him with a faint leer.*] Bring it yourself . . . to my quarters . . . to-night. Yes . . . to-night . . . at 21.30.

[*She turns abruptly and goes out, very well pleased with herself.*]

ORDERLY [*after watching her exit, with a ruefully whimsical expression*]

Sergeant, I'm afraid I shall lose my . . . sense of humour, after all.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

Serve your right. Now get out.

ORDERLY

That's very ungrateful of you, Sergeant. [*Crosses to him and speaks with an assumed grimness.*] I wonder what

would have happened to you if I hadn't listened in?
[Then, smiling and speaking quietly] Let's hope she never gets a correct translation of this Docket! *[The SERGEANT gapes at him, dazed by his impudence.]* Dam' funny, isn't it? Viscount! Ha, ha, ha, ha!

[He goes out, laughing immoderately.]

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR

My God! *[He stands irresolutely for a few seconds, staring after the ORDERLY, then starts forward as though to bring him back; walks slowly back to the table, looks at the certificate, and then, with sudden resolution, decides to carry the deception through. He brings the couple to attention with a roar.]* Party, . . . 'shun! *[He tears out the certificate, which he hands to the woman.]* Here is your Certificate of Allotment. In future you will be known as 76543 M.F., and you *[to the man]* will be 76543 M.M. You will get new armlets from the Quartermaster's Stores.

WOMAN

MAN

Yes, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR *[taking four books from the table and handing them to the woman]*

Here are your books of instruction. *Matrimony and the State, The Mechanics of Matrimony, The Child and the State, The Sanctity of the State.*

MARRIED FEMALE

Thank you, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR *[handing a document to the man]*

Here is a Joint Provisional Passport. Your documents will be sent to your commandant after completion.

MAN

Very good, sir.

SERGEANT-REGISTRAR *[switching on televisior]*

Reception? Send up the next couple. *[Switches off.]*

You are granted the usual ten days' light duty away. You will proceed to the Guildhall Roof Station and take the sixteen-thirty helicopter for the Scilly Isles. On arrival you will report to the Chief Instructor at the Matrimonial Barracks. Yes. He'll tell you what to do . . . and how! Party . . . fall in! 'Shun! Left turn! Quick . . . mrrrrrrrch!

[On the command "Left turn" there should be a roll of drums, and on the command "Quick" a militarized version of the "Wedding March" (Mendelssohn) should play as the couple march off and

THE CURTAIN FALLS

[illegible]

OUR LAD

By HERBERT INGHAM

Prize-winning play Morecambe Festival 1934
Adjudicator: M. STERLING MACKINLAY

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CHARACTERS

JOE WILLIAMS

LIBBY ANN WILLIAMS, *his wife*

SARAH ELLEN BROWN, *Libby's*
sister

DR HOLMES

TIME: *The present. A winter's night about 8 P.M.*

Applications regarding performances of this play should be addressed to Play Rights and Publications, Ltd., Maltravers House, Arundel Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or The Baker International Play Bureau, 178 Tremont Street, Boston, U.S.A.

OUR LAD

The furnishing of the room is such as one finds in an ordinary working-class dwelling. There are two doors. One up-stage L., opening on to the street, and one up-stage R., leading upstairs. Down-stage R. is a kitchen fireplace, with a rag rug on the hearth. On the mantelpiece are the usual cottage ornaments—brass candlesticks, pot dogs, etc. By the fire R.C. is a big armchair. Below door L. is a sofa. At the back R. is a small table with a plant-pot containing a fern. At back C. is a chair, and at back L. a kitchen dresser. At R.C. are a table and a chair. On the table is an ironing-blanket. At L.C. is a clothes basket of household linen standing on a chair. Close to this is a small clothes maiden. On the walls are one or two pictures of the type found in a cottage. An enlarged photograph of a young man in khaki wearing a Sam Browne belt is hanging in full view of the audience above the chair C. on the back wall. It is quite dark outside, and the room is lit by means of a lamp placed wherever convenient.

As the curtain goes up JOE WILLIAMS and his wife are disclosed. JOE is a grizzled man of sixty, with a face the colour of pumice-stone. He is seated huddled up in the armchair near the fire. A newspaper lies neglected on his knees, and he stares gloomily into the fire. His wife, LIBBY ANN, is a few years younger than JOE. Her hair is plastered back and done in a bun at the nape of her neck in an old-fashioned way. She is a cheerful, tidy person, as is evidenced by the neat appearance of the room. She is busy ironing at the table R.C.

The iron she is using is the old-fashioned flat-iron, and during the early dialogue she passes backward and forward between the table and the fire, where her irons are heating. For a time after the rise of the curtain no word passes between them. LIBBY from time to time casts an anxious look towards JOE.

LIBBY

What's time, Joe?

[There is no answer. LIBBY, after a look at JOE, shakes her head, and bangs her iron on its stand.]

JOE *[starting from his abstraction]*

Eh, lass! What? Did tha speak?

LIBBY

Did I speak? I've spoken two-thri times, but tha takes no notice. Now, look here, lad; tha'll have to stop worriting thysen. If Doctor says tha canna go to thi work—well, tha canna. It'll be all right. We are noan so short o' brass that we canna manage.

JOE

That's all reet, lass. I'm noan worriting about brass. Tha knows that. I were nobbut just thinking about our lad, and wondering like.

LIBBY

Well, give ower just thinking, then. Our John'll write when he's settled down again. And, besides, he said he'd be knocking about a bit after he left Chicago, and it would be a time afore he got to Mexico. And, anyway, he weren't certain but what he might come home. *[She goes to the dresser L., opens a drawer, and pulls out a handbag. From it she takes a cigar.]* Sithi what I bought for thee to-day. Happen tha'd best not smoke it till Doctor's been. Smoking may not be good for thee just at present.

✓
JOE [*taking the cigar and smelling at it*]

Thanks, lass. I'll keep it for a while.

[*He gets up with difficulty and puts the cigar on the mantelpiece.*]

LIBBY

I wonder how long it'll be afore t'doctor comes. Our Sarah Ellen said hoo'd call at surgery and ask him to come. What time is it?

JOE

Just after eight. Th' express has just gone through. I heard it goin' over t' viaduct two or three minutes ago. . . . I say, Libby, if your Sarah comes in get shut on her as soon as you can. Her fair makes my head get all cluttered up w' t' way hoo gabs and gases.

LIBBY [*smiling*]

All right, Joe. I'll do my best. [*A knock at the door L.*] I think that'll be her.

[*The door L. opens. SARAH BROWN enters. She is a sharp-featured woman of about fifty. She is carrying a shopping-basket, and wears clogs on her feet, with a shawl over her head instead of a hat. Under her shawl is a patched bodice of some indeterminate colour. Her skirt-hem dips at the heels, and is a good six inches higher at the front.*]

SARAH

Can I come in? Well, Joe, how's ta feeling? [*She puts down her basket on the chair C. back, drops her shawl about her shoulders, revealing her hair fastened in the sketchiest fashion, with pointed wisps draggling here and there, and proceeds to make herself at home. She sits on the chair R. of table.*] I called at Dr Holmes and left word for him to come and see thee. He'll soon put thee on thy legs again, for he's a champion doctor. I'll bet old Dr Sawtry an' that two yards o' misery they call Dawson is feelin' t' draught a bit, for Dr Holmes is gettin' all t' sick jobs

down at Pearson's works. Tha knows Dick Longshaw's lad, an' how long he's been bad?

JOE

Aye.

SARAH

Well, it's nobbut a two or three weeks since Dr Holmes started doctoring him, an he's not like same lad now. Have you heard from your John Walter lately?

JOE

Not for a bit, Sarah Ellen. He's left Chicago, an' is travellin' somewhere in Mexico. Last time he wrote he sent me a pipe and his mother some brass to buy hersel' a new dress. So I think he must be doin' well.

SARAH

I'll bet he is, for he were always a wick un when he were little. Ee, but I shall never forget takin' him to t' pictures once on his birthday. We sat behind a woman with a big feather in her hat. About half-way through t' show she turned round and, talking well-off like, said, "I hope my feathers aren't spoiling your view. I'll take my hat off." "Oh, it's all right, missis," said your John Walter; "it doesn't matter. I cut t' feathers off your hat about half an hour ago."

LIBBY

Ee, Sarah! He didn't, did he? You never told me that afore.

SARAH

Well, I didn't want him to get in no bother. An' he really meant no harm, didn't lad. Well, I must be goin'. When you write to your John Walter again give him his Aunt Sarah's love, and tell him I hope he'll soon be home again.

[She gets her basket off the chair under the photograph.]

JOE

Right, Sarah Ellen, I will.

SARAH [*looking at the portrait on the wall*]

You know, every time I look at this picture o' John it makes me think there's summat wrong somewhere when a lad like that, after all he'd done in t' War, couldna get a job in his own country.

JOE

Aye, I reckon there is. [*A pause.*] They're a great while afore they make it a country fit for poor heroes to live in. But it's happen all for t' best. I dare say our big men and politicians are trying hard as they can to straighten things up.

SARAH

They happen are, an' they happen aren't. They'd happen try harder if *they* had to go as short as poor folks do. They never had to go short o' beef, beer, and 'bacca like tha's had to do mony a time. If they had, they'd try a bit harder, I fancy.

LIBBY

I wish things would look up a bit. I reckon everybody's doing their best. T'other countries are worse off than us, they tell me.

SARAH [*sitting again on chair R. of table. JOE shows his irritation on finding that she is not going, and buries his head in his newspaper*]

They say so, dunno they? It might be true, but it's poor consolation for us. Somebody's to blame, are no' they? An' I'm sure it's noan poor folk. It's time we had a change. Fancy tellin' folks like thee and me to economize! Why dunno they set us an example?

JOE

Tha owt to be i' Parliament, Sarah Ellen. But it's no use

grouching. Let's try and think there's folk worse off than ourselves.

SARAH

If there is I feel sorry for 'em. Who's responsible? That's what I want to know. What puzzles me is why we dunno get to know and turn 'em out. There's surely enough brains i' land to shape better than this.

JOE

There is, Sarah Ellen. But there's also too much selfishness. That's what is up. But it's no use o' bothering, lass.

SARAH

But if we don't bother, who will? All I can say is if you want a thing well done you mun do it yourself.

JOE

That's all rect i' some things, Sarah Ellen. But how would you go on when you wanted your hair cut?

SARAH

Tha's no need to be so scornful, Joe Williams, and keep throwin' thy slurs out. Tha'rt nobbut wastin' thy wind.

JOE [*angrily*]

I havena wasted as much wind as thee yet, Sarah Ellen.

LIBBY [*soothingly*]

Now, then, you two. Don't start fratching. . . . How's that chap going on you were telling us about as come to lodge next door to you? Ted Barlow I think you said he were called.

SARAH

Oh, I don't think he's very comfortable in his lodgings. Last Saturday night he tried to drown his worries i' cheap whisky, but, like kittens, they had nine lives and wouldna drown. I think he must be a bachelor, poor fellow.

LIBBY

Why, what makes you think that, Sarah?

SARAH

Well, you know you can always tell a bachelor because he has no buttons on his shirt.

JOE [*drily*]

Aye, Sarah Ellen. Maybe that's true. But tha mustna forget a married man often has no shirt.

SARAH

Well, that would not make much difference to thee.

LIBBY

Why, Sarah, however do you mean?

SARAH

Well, we all know thy husband's an angel wi' feathers on.

LIBBY [*heatedly*]

At any rate he's noan henpecked, like somebody I could mention.

JOE

Shut up, both on yo! If folks get wed because they loved one another they'd each think t'other were an angel, and there'd be a lot more pleasure in th' world.

SARAH

Ee heck! Tha should ha' bin a parson. [*Tapping JOE on the shoulder*] Did thee get wed for love?

JOE

I did. An' onybody who gets wed for owt else deserves to be miserable all their life. A life's happiness doesn't end when courting stops, if there's ony love about. A gradely couple'll go on courtin' for ever.

SARAH

Oh, dear! Hark ye at th' little turtle-dove talking. Well, I mun be goin'. [*She gets up and walks R. to the fireplace. She sees the cigar which JOE has put on the mantel-piece.*] Hello, Joe, are ta so weel'off that tha can smoke cigars? Don't you know that a lot o' chaps have given up smoking lately?

JOE [*wearily bending down and lifting up the newspaper*]

Aye, Sarah Ellen, I do. I've just been reading their names in th' burial column.

SARAH [*tossing her head and adjusting her shawl*]

Oh, it's no good talking to thee. Well, good night to you both. I'll look in to-morrow.

LIBBY

Good night, Sarah, and thank you for going to t' doctor's for me.

SARAH

Oh, that's all right, Libby. Good night.

JOE

Good night, Sarah.

[*On the point of exit SARAH comes back into the room. As she speaks her first words JOE in desperation throws down his paper, scratches his head, and looks thoroughly disgruntled.*]

SARAH

Ec, Joe, I were forgetting summat I had to tell thee. Tha knows Wesley Chapel, i' Bank Street.

JOE [*resignedly*]

Aye.

SARAH

Well, they've gotten a grand new organ there. And folks as goes to Primitive place round t' corner is some an' mad about it. For they are always tryin' to outdo one another. Well, t'other day Dick Smethurst—tha knows, him as plays th' organ at Bank Street . . .

JOE

Aye.

SARAH

Well, he were walking down t' road, and th' organist from t'other place—I forget his name—stopped Dick and said, "I've been hearing as tha's gotten an organ.

All tha needs now is a monkey." "Aye," said Dick, "and all tha needs is an organ." Well, I really mun be going. Good night.

LIBBY

JOE

Good night.

[Exit SARAH. There is silence for a few moments;
LIBBY is putting away her ironing, etc.]

LIBBY

You know, Joe, you should not fratch so with our Sarah. She means well.

JOE

I'm sorry, lass, but while hoo were here I were just thinking how well this advertisement for pictures in t' newspaper fitted her. [He looks in the paper.] Here it is. A hundred-per-cent. all-talking, continuous performance.

LIBBY

Well, ne'er heed that. Only, Joe, tell me. Did you really mean what you said to our Sarah? [JOE looks puzzled and frowns.] I mean that bit about a gradely couple going on courting for ever.

[As LIBBY asks this she slips on her knees beside JOE's chair. JOE puts his arm round her neck.]

JOE

Aye, lass. It's just the same with me now as it were when I used to come to see thee in our courting days. When thy eyes were like misty jewels above a red mouth, and you sat in t' parlour toasting your feet in t' front o' the fire, spilling smiles out o' corners of your mouth. I could not make my love for you charmin'. I could not teach it ony tricks. Why, t' poor thing did not even know how to walk on its hind-legs. But my love for you, Libby, were simply the whole o' my days, the whole o' my nights. I were nobbut a very ordinary

chap, and the only really good thing about me was that I loved you very dearly. And I wanted to try and make you a happy woman.

LIBBY [*furtively wiping her eyes*]

And you have, Joe lad. You have.

[*A slight pause ensues, terminated by a knock at the door L. LIBBY scrambles to her feet, and, smoothing her apron, crosses to the door L. She opens it, and DR HOLMES enters. He is a man of about thirty-six, and carries a small bag. At first his manner is somewhat brusque, for he had been looking forward to a quiet smoke and read after his day. Presently his interest is aroused by the old couple, and he becomes his natural, pleasant self.*]

LIBBY

Good evening, Doctor.

DR HOLMES

Good evening, Mrs Williams. [*Turning to JOE*] Is this our invalid? [*He puts his bag on the chair under the portrait on the back wall, and crosses over to JOE R.*] Well, what's the trouble?

JOE

Nay, Doctor, that's what I want thee to find out. I think it's summat wrong with my chest, for I wheezes like a pair o' brokken bellows.

DR HOLMES

Well, how would it be if I just sounded your chest first?

[*DR HOLMES proceeds to examine JOE, first taking his pulse, and while he is doing so LIBBY speaks her next lines.*]

LIBBY

I wish you'd drive a bit o' sense into Joe, Doctor. He's noan so young as he were, and he's trying to do far too much. For t' last three weeks he's been working over-

time, so's he can help his mate, who's been off his work ill, and who has a family o' four young uns, so they've nobbut been in a poor way. But I keep tellin' Joe it willna help them nor me if he cracks up. . . . If you'll just excuse me, Doctor, I'll go and see to Joe's supper. If you want me for anything just call out, but I'll be back presently.

DR HOLMES

Very well, Mrs Williams.

[LIBBY goes out by the door R. DR HOLMES continues with his examination, using a stethoscope on JOE'S chest, and then sounding him. Finally he stands with his back to the fireplace, looking at JOE.]

JOE

Does this thumpin' mean owt to you, Doctor? You remind me o' chap as walks length o' th' express trains tappin' th' axles with a hammer. But he never seems to find owt.

DR HOLMES

I don't find anything seriously wrong with you bodily, but I'm afraid you are worrying about something. What is it?

[There is a slight pause. DR HOLMES moves to C., and puts away his stethoscope in his bag. During the ensuing dialogue he keeps glancing at the portrait on the wall and comparing the likeness with JOE, apparently wondering what connexion there is between this smart young fellow in captain's uniform and the grizzled old man JOE.]

JOE

Could you give me summat to make me sleep hard o' nights, Doctor?

DR HOLMES

Why? Are you sleeping badly?

JOE

Well, Doctor, you see, it's like this. Since I've been ill I find myself sometimes talking when I'm sort of half asleep. And I want to sleep hard, as I daren't go on like this for fear t' wife finds out what I'm trying to hide from her.

DR HOLMES

Umph!

[At this moment LIBBY enters from R. She sees the doctor's interest in the photograph, and, while she helps JOE to fasten the neck-band of his shirt as he fumbles with it, exclaims:]

LIBBY

That's our lad, Doctor. We're hoping to see him afore long, coming back with his pockets full o' money. Not as it'll make any difference to us if he comes back with nowt save a hole in 'em. Will it, Joe?

[JOE takes her work-seamed hand and furtively presses it lovingly to his cheek, but makes no reply.]

DR HOLMES

I'm sure you are both very proud of your son. Several times since I've been here I have heard of his daring and bravery during the War. And how he gained a comission for retaking a trench single-handed.

[During the end of this speech JOE is whispering agitatedly to his wife, who keeps saying "No, no," and finally ends up as the doctor stops speaking:]

LIBBY

Don't bother the doctor to-night, Joe.

JOE

That's all right, lass. I'll noan bother him. Just go and get my bed ready. Doctor says I'd better get laid down, as it's bad for my chest sitting up in a chair.

DR HOLMES

Yes, Mrs Williams, I think that would be advisable.

[LIBBY goes out R. DR HOLMES moves to fireplace.

JOE

I hope you'll do what I asked you about my medicine. You're a busy man, I know, and probably now you'll be feeling like a smoke and a rest, but if you can spare a few minutes I should like to tell you what I'm flaid of th' missis finding out. . . . Here, have a cigar. [JOE gets up and gives the doctor the cigar from off the mantelpiece.] I don't know whether it's a good un. Libby Ann bought it for me, but I'm afeared a woman is na much judge o' 'bacca. . . . They choose 'em accordin' to th' pictures on t' box, I fancy.

[DR HOLMES takes the cigar and lights it doubtfully. Throughout, as he smokes, he from time to time eyes the cigar furtively, though always in a manner not to give offence.

DR HOLMES

Oh, I would not say that. In these days I think many women are quite good judges of a smoke.

JOE

Happen you're right. I only know as how the last ones Libby bought for me at Christmas smelt like as if t' door-mat were burning. [Sniffing] But that one does not seem so bad.

DR HOLMES

It's very nice, I assure you.

[There is silence for a few moments. JOE makes two or three attempts at speaking, but evidently cannot frame his opening sentence, beginning in turn with "Well, now . . .," "You see, Doctor . . .," etc.

JOE

You are only a newcomer to our district, Doctor, but

likes what I've seen o' you, and th' chaps crack you up at our works.

[DR HOLMES *raises his hand deprecatingly in protest.*

DR HOLMES

It's very kind of you to say that. You see, I've often felt that the people of the district regarded me as an inter-loper, and they seemed to treat my advances to know them better with suspicion and aloofness.

JOE

Happen there's some truth in that, Doctor. But you'll find out as you get to know us better that us folk take time afore we're ready to be friendly, especially with a doctor. Now, can you say as how you'd soon get friendly with an undertaker?

DR HOLMES [*laughingly*]

Well, no. I don't think I can.

[*He walks to C. and sits R. of the table near JOE, who has turned his chair slightly, so that both are now facing the audience.*

JOE

Well, you know, it's nearly t' same thing.

DR HOLMES

Oh, come, come, Mr Williams.

JOE

I've heard folk say what one tells a doctor is as safe as what one says to a priest. . . . Not as I know much about priests, save what I've seen of 'em at weddings and buryings.

DR HOLMES

You can rest assured that whatever you tell me will be regarded by me as being told in strict confidence.

JOE

That'll do, then. Well, you heard what my wife said

when you were looking at our lad's photograph. She said we were expecting him back.

DR HOLMES

Yes.

[JOE gets up, walks to the door R., opens it quietly, and listens for a few moments; then, satisfied that no one is about, he returns to the back of his chair.]

JOE

Well, he'll noan come back . . . for he's dead.

DR HOLMES *[startled]*

Dead! But——

JOE *[sitting down]*

Better wait till I've telled y' all t' story afore you ask ony questions. When t' War broke out and our lad joined up he were nobbut a caretaker and cleaner in t' schools here. But he were a gradely young fellow, and smart at that, and he soon made his way. He were promoted quickly, and when peace came he'd risen to th' rank of captain. . . . You can imagine when he come back he thought he were a cut above his old job.

DR HOLMES

Yes, yes. I can quite understand that.

JOE

Well, he tried all he could to get summat better. But it were no use. Also he learned a lot o' things in th' army besides feighting, and knew what it were to have money to burn. . . . In time he got at a loose end, and when he could not get a better job here went off to America.

DR HOLMES

I can sympathize with him in the heartbreaking task of going round day after day and hearing the oft-repeated phrase, "I'm sorry; there's nothing at present. Perhaps if you called to-morrow . . ." Poor devils! What

surprises me is that there were not more cases of self-restraint and discipline being thrown to the winds.

JOE

Maybe you're right. Well, he wandered about for a bit, and then finally wrote to us from Chicago. As time went on he sent us word to say how well he were getting on, and his mother and me received many a present o' money from him. [*At this point JOE sits up and clutches at the doctor's knee. His agitation is so great that he can scarcely say the words quickly enough.*] I want you, Doctor, to believe me when I tell you that you can ask onybody that knows me, [*tapping himself on the chest*] me, Joe Williams, whether I've ever addled a dishonest penny, and I know th' answer'll be "No."

DR HOLMES

Yes, yes. I'm sure of that. [*Gently pushing JOE back into his chair*] Now, don't start worrying, or you'll bring on the pain in your chest again.

JOE

Often in his letters our John wrote about the position he was making for hissen in Chicago, and I thought I would like to see a Chicago paper to read what sort of a place it were, and to see if our John's name ever appeared in it—like as bein' on t' football club board, for he were always a good un at football. Or I thought, perhaps, he might have gotten in t' town council. . . . I can see now as it were only pride, and so that I could show t' paper to t' chaps in our works. Anyway, I wrote to one o' the Sunday papers, and they told me how I could subscribe to a newspaper called the *Chicago Tribune*, and have a copy sent over once a week.

DR HOLMES

Yes, I know that paper. And did you ever see your son's name in it?

JOE

Only once, Doctor, as you'll hear in a minute. . . . Chicago seemed to be a rum place, full o' ructions and shootin' and all sorts o' lawlessness, and I felt glad as our John would be able to look after hissen after t' time he'd had i' th' army. Two or three months ago a letter come from him to say he were doing a big stroke o' business, and if it went through he were going somewhere further south to a place in Mexico, and we weren't to write to him till we heard from him again, and that would probably not be for some time.

A few weeks after this I were sat one night reading my Chicago paper when I suddenly see an account of a bank robbery in which one of the gang who had been engaged in it had been killed. It give a long account of it, and described him as were killed as being an Englishman, going under the name of John Walters. Also it said he had a patch of snow-white hair on top of his head. I knew at once it were my lad, for his name were John Walter Williams, and he had evidently been calling himself John Walters. Also my lad had that white patch on his head, caused through a dose o' mustard-gas in th' War.

DR HOLMES

Poor devil! [*He rises and takes a turn to C. and back again, muttering:*] And poor old parents!

JOE

Everything were plain to me now, and I knew why he'd always seemed to be changing his address for us to write to, and lots more things as I had thought strange. But when I realized the full truth of what it really meant I knew I must at all costs keep it from my missis. So I burned t' paper straight away, and when Libby asked me for it I telled her I had lost it at th' works.

I don't make any excuses for my lad, Doctor, but he

E

were always a good un to his mother and me, and as long as I can prevent it his mother shall ne'er know owt against him. When he went sodgering he went to France just as if he were goin' to a football-match.

I were never much hand at prayin', but i' my way I prayed to God all them days and months to spare him . . . *[rises]* to spare him . . . and for what, Doctor? *[He walks to the photograph and stands with his back to the audience.]* . . . For this! *[At this point JOE breaks down, but as soon as he regains control of himself he stumbles over to the doctor, who is now looking into the fire, and puts his hand on his shoulder.]* Perhaps you can understand now why I'm flaid o' talking in my sleep. . . . Have I done right, Doctor?

[There is a pause. JOE sits down heavily in his chair, and buries his head in his hands.]

DR HOLMES

I don't know just what to say. Words are so futile. I don't know your dialect very well. *[He comes to JOE, and sympathetically claps him on the shoulder.]* But there is one word I often hear used, which I think expresses my opinion of what you have done, and that is 'jannock.'

[During the pause after these words LIBBY ANN comes bustling into the room, wagging an admonitory finger at JOE. JOE hastily sits up and tries to smile.]

LIBBY

Now, Joe, lad. Don't keep t' doctor here any longer with thy gabbing. I'm sure he'll be sick to death of hearing about our John, and wishing thee far enough.

[LIBBY turns to DR HOLMES, and though her homely face is crinkled into a network of mirth, yet in her faded old eyes lurks an air of sadness.]

DR HOLMES

Well, Joe, you'd better get off to bed, and I'll just give Mrs Williams a few instructions as to what to do for

you, though really I think she is doing everything that is necessary.

JOE [*rising*]

Thank you, Doctor. And about that——

DR HOLMES

Yes, yes. I'll not forget. I'll see to that medicine myself. Good night.

JOE

Good night, Doctor.

[JOE goes out R., LIBBY seeing him as far as the door, which she carefully closes. As she returns LIBBY becomes another woman. In some subtle way it seems as though the mere act of seeing JOE out of the room has aged her by many years, and her face, now devoid of geniality, has become haggard and drawn. She clutches at the hem of her apron, and as she speaks keeps running it through her fingers into a series of pleats.]

LIBBY

I expect Joe has asked you to try and make inquiries for him about our lad, seeing as he has not heard from him for some time. But, Doctor, let me tell you it's no use.

[*She becomes silent, and stares in front of her with fixed eyes.*]

DR HOLMES

There, there, Mrs Williams, don't——

LIBBY

No, Doctor. It's no use. You see, Joe thinks our lad is in Mexico, and is always wondering when we shall see him again. . . . But we shan't . . . ever, . . . for he's . . . dead. He was shot in a bank robbery in Chicago.

[DR HOLMES makes an involuntary movement towards her.]

DR HOLMES

But——

LIBBY [*raising her hand to silence him*]

Oh, I know it's true, because one of his chums out there found our address among John's things, and wrote to say he had been killed. But I never let Joe know. . . . It would break his heart. . . . He was so proud of our lad.

CURTAIN

MEN ARE MISSING

By MICHAEL RAYNE

Prize-winning play Buxton Festival 1935

Adjudicator: MARTIN BROWNE

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Michael Rayne*

M. L. Sereno

M. L. Sereno

CHARACTERS

THE HOSTESS, *Mrs Granville Doherty*, aged about fifty

LADY NORA, *her niece*, aged about twenty

AN ACTRESS, *Hilary Nield*, a friend of Nora's from
London, a sophisticated woman of about twenty-five

MRS OSBALDESTON, *the vicar's wife*, plain and solid,
between fifty and sixty

MISS PREEDWORTHY, *a wealthy spinster*, just over to
dinner from a neighbouring town

A NOVELIST, *Marie Howard*, about fifty, who is on a
week-end visit

MADAME SELENIK, *wife of a foreign diplomat*

MRS BARRY DELAMANE, *who is visiting from India*

PHYLLIS, *a maid*

FIRST STRANGER

SECOND STRANGER

M. L. Sereno

M. L. Sereno

Applications regarding performances of this play should be
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MEN ARE MISSING

SCENE: *The terrace of a large country house in loneliest Ireland. Back-stage are three or five large windows. The centre one opens with French windows into the house. To heighten the effect of a terrace a low stone wall or balustrade can be seen at either side of the stage near the footlights, leaving a wide space centre open. Tall garden lamps are placed at the centre ends of the terrace wall.*

The time is midsummer—a hot August night—possibly about nine o'clock. Dinner is over, and the HOSTESS and the lady guests are coming from the house through the French windows on to the terrace. The men are presumably busy with port, cigars, and stories. The curtain rises on PHYLLIS, the maid who is arranging sufficient chairs at small tables on the terrace. Having finished, she then stands with her back to the audience, looking through the open French windows. As she hears voices she becomes very alert and lights the terrace lamps. A piano is playing the "Londonderry Air."

Enter LADY NORA and MARIE HOWARD, the novelist, arm in arm, through the French windows. They stand a moment just outside the window on the terrace, looking up and about.

Exit PHYLLIS through the French windows after their entrance.

NORA

Oh, what a perfectly gorgeous night! I'm so glad you've seen Ireland for the first time on such a lovely night.

NOVELIST

Can't see much of it, my dear, but I can imagine how

lovely and desolate it all is. Is that dark smudge [*pointing over the audience*] a cloud or a distant mountain?

NORA [*laughing*]

Neither. It's our very famous yew-tree, and quite two hundred years old.

NOVELIST [*as they come forward*]

Always very gratifying to meet something older than oneself, even if it's only a tree.

NORA

Why, you talk as though you were a hundred.

NOVELIST

Sometimes I feel it. Being a novelist puts years on one.

NORA [*laughing*]

What are you writing at the moment?

NOVELIST

Nothing. I'm like a river that has run for long, long years . . . and then for some unaccountable reason . . . dried up. Do you know what I mean?

NORA [*very interested*]

You mean you can't find anything to write about?

NOVELIST

I feel as though I've come up against a high blank wall. I can't even find my characters. I'm just stumped.

NORA

That's tragic. But think of the people Auntie has had here to dine to-night.

NOVELIST

I adore your aunt. She's the type of woman I'd choose to be if I could.

NORA

Auntie's a dear, but she's not *quite* perfect. I think she's rather stingy. That's why she's hoarded such a fortune; but Uncle [*smiling indulgently*] is an angel. He swears

abominably at times, especially when he hears the word 'poachers,' and he almost becomes a raving lunatic at the very whisper of trespassers.

NOVELIST

Perhaps he's afraid that a trespasser will one day run off with his lovely niece.

NORA

He thinks far more of his domain. But think of the others. Surely there is one among them sufficiently exciting to inspire you? Probably they all have skeletons in their cupboards. If we could only see inside their brains!

NOVELIST

An appalling thought! Personally, I should hate it. You know, my dear, what we all need at times *is a terrific jolt*, just to bring us back to a more reasonable level.

NORA

I never thought of that.

NOVELIST

No, my dear, you won't. It is definitely an after-fortyish feeling.

NORA

I wonder if I shall feel that way when I am forty?

NOVELIST

By the time you're that age, my dear, it will probably be considered indecent to have lived so long.

NORA

Not in Ireland. We live to be a hundred.

NOVELIST

Yes, perhaps things are different in Ireland, Nora. It has something about it, and I feel as though there may be romance round the corner . . . [NORA laughs] and adventure. Yes, don't laugh. I'm craving for *adventure*

at my age. And this place is romantic and lonely. How many miles are there of countryside before we come to other living creatures?

NORA

Ballycudden is fifteen miles away, but there is a hamlet called Storney six miles south, and everybody's very poor, excepting the people who live in big houses like this. Then there's nothing but woods and fields and the river for miles . . . and the mountains, of course.

NOVELIST [*taking out a packet of cigarettes and lighting one*]
Marvellous! Have a cigarette?

NORA

Oh, shall I try one? I've never smoked.

NOVELIST

Never!

NORA

Not even for fun.

NOVELIST

My dear, you're positively unique! I shall certainly immortalize you in one of my characters. [*Leaning forward intensely*] Probably a bit of you will drift into my next novel.

NORA

Oh, which bit? Do tell me. What have you noticed? How thrilling! Please!

NOVELIST

Well, it's very easy to see that you are in love.

NORA [*surprised*]

How did you guess?

NOVELIST

Isn't it the handsome young man with the small black moustache? Let me see, he was sitting between——

NORA

Yes, that's he. Don't you think he's rather a dear?
We're to be engaged soon. I'm so happy.

NOVELIST

How soon?

NORA

Aunty says in a month, but [*whispering*] it's a secret.

NOVELIST

Yes; rather wonderful. Have you known him long?

NORA

Years and years and years. We knew one another as children. Then he went away to school in England.

NOVELIST

He's very clever, I suppose?

NORA

Oh, not really. [*Brightly*] He's going to be a diplomat.

NOVELIST

I see. He's travelled?

NORA

Oh, yes! First he was at the Embassy in Paris, then the Legation in Helsingfors. Since then Rome, Naples, and Vienna.

NOVELIST

Quite a Baedeker, in fact. So that one day you're to be an Ambassador's wife?

NORA

It would be rather nice, wouldn't it?

NOVELIST

What's he called?

NORA

Dicky. Full name, Richard Bartholomew Meredith.

NOVELIST

I do hope you'll be happy, dear. You're so terribly nice. Do be sure . . . he's the right man.

NORA

But I *am* sure. There just couldn't be anyone else. I've always known that. I've always loved him.

[NORA gets up and moves away, and voices are heard as her aunt, MRS GRANVILLE DOHERTY, a smartly dressed woman, enters with the vicar's wife, MRS OSBALDESTON, who is dressed very plainly, and is very severe and rather mannish-looking.]

HOSTESS

It's quite warm. I'm sure it will be quite lovely on the terrace. [To NORA] Did you hear Mrs Delamane play the *Londonderry Air*? She plays divinely.

MRS OSBALDESTON

Quite delightful. Quite delightful, I'm sure.

HOSTESS

Will you sit here?

MRS OSBALDESTON

That will do nicely. My husband is always reminding me that summer nights can be very treacherous. Better to put a little on than take a little off. Don't you agree?
[Laughs.]

NORA

Oh, Aunty! Captain Carruthers wonders if we might roll up the carpet in the lounge and dance. There's a lovely band on the radio.

HOSTESS

Of course you can, child. I'd love a hop myself. Good for the liver.
[Rises.]

NORA

Don't bother just yet, Aunty. The men will be hours over their nasty cigars and wicked stories.

MRS OSBALDESTON

Wicked stories, indeed! The vicar would never countenance such depravity.

HOSTESS

I'll fetch the others, and have coffee brought out here.

[Exit. She meets HILARY, the actress, in the window opening. HILARY is a blonde and very smart. She is opening her cigarette-case, and strolls leisurely to MRS OSBALDESTON.]

ACTRESS

Hallo, everybody! What a divine night! *[To MRS OSBALDESTON]* Have a gasper?

MRS OSBALDESTON *[shuddering]*

I wouldn't dream of such a thing. I may be modern in many ways, but smoking . . . so unnecessary!

[Takes a small tin of peppermints from her bag.]

NORA

At least we have something in common, Mrs Osbaldeston. But men smoke. Why shouldn't we women?

MRS OSBALDESTON

Men are the baser creatures. We must keep some of our finer instincts. Will anyone have a peppermint?

[HILARY comes forward and leans against a terrace lamp.]

ACTRESS

What a gorgeous setting for a play! Couldn't we stage something while we're here? How peaceful!

MRS OSBALDESTON

Do you like being on the stage, Miss Nield?

ACTRESS

Love it. I only wish producers liked me half so much.

MRS OSBALDESTON

What are you doing at present, Miss Nield?

ACTRESS

What is commonly called 'resting.'

NOVELIST

Why don't you go to Hollywood?

ACTRESS

To be quite candid, I've not been asked.

MRS OSBALDESTON

Hollywood, indeed! I tell my husband—the vicar, you know—that it is the modern equivalent to Sodom and Gomorrah.

[Enter the HOSTESS with MISS PREEDWORTHY, who is a very inquisitive and fussy spinster. She is dressed very girlishly.]

MISS PREEDWORTHY

I do hope I haven't missed anything. I think it's such a relief to get away from the men, if it's only for ten minutes. We can let ourselves go.

MRS OSBALDESTON

Go where?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

I mean *relax*, dear Mrs Osbaldeston. There's such a tension when the men are about. One never knows what they'll say next.

NORA

Whatever do you mean, Miss Preedworthy?

MISS PREEDWORTHY *[sitting C.]*

Jokes, you know. I think they always have a double meaning, and I'm such a curious girl. I always was. My dear father always said it would get me into stormy weather. One of his favourite quotations. Funny, don't you think?

ACTRESS *[sarcastically]*

Dreadfully!

[Fortunately at that moment MRS BARRY DELAMANE and MADAME SELENIK enter arm in arm and

laughing. Both are smart. MRS BARRY DELAMANE is slight, while MADAME SELENIK is a tall, dark, handsome Austrian woman.

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

Ladies, you must persuade Madame Selenik to tell you some tales of Vienna life. I'm quite determined to go there before I go back to India next year.

[MADAME SELENIK *has walked over to the* ACTRESS.

PHYLLIS *enters with a tray of coffee cups, and the* HOSTESS *motions to her to pass them round.*

HOSTESS

I've ordered coffee to be brought out here. The men—brutes!—will be imbibing port by the gallon. Edward is proud of his port.

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

How men love getting together! I always think it's intensely funny the moment we begin to move after dinner how they all *rush* to open the door and herd us out.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Just as though they wanted to be rid of us.

MADAME SELENIK

Per'aps they do.

ACTRESS

I wonder what they talk about as soon as we have walked out on them.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Yes, I've always been curious on that point. Do you think they talk about us? How thrilling!

ACTRESS

No, they talk about the *other* women.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Which other women?

MRS OSBALDESTON

My husband would never dream of discussing other women. Why should he? I think they just talk about their schooldays and the naughty things they did.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Which naughty things? Do tell me.

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

I don't see why the vicar shouldn't talk about other women. Surely the fact of his being a vicar doesn't prevent him from being a man?

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*who is trying her best to listen to all the different conversations*]

Don't you think it would be interesting to ask the vicar?

ACTRESS

Ask the vicar what?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

If being a vicar prevents him from . . .

[*She stops in confusion.*]

MRS OSBALDESTON

Who was the man on your left at the dinner table, Miss Preedworthy?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Now, let me think. Oh, that was Mr Lancelot. He is a Boy Scout.

ACTRESS

A damn' big one!

MISS PREEDWORTHY

He began to tell me a story over dinner, but he stopped half-way and blushed.

HOSTESS

Blushed!

MISS PREEDWORTHY

I think he suddenly remembered the end. He was very confused.

ACTRESS

Did he finish it?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Of course not! It was too dreadful.

ACTRESS

How do you know?

[*The ACTRESS and MADAME SELENIK rise and saunter off C.*]

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Well . . . er . . . [*very quietly*] I'd heard it before. Mrs Osbaldeston told me.

MRS OSBALDESTON [*severely*]

Please tell them the circumstances, my dear.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Yes, she said she overheard Mrs Delamane telling it to Captain Car——

MRS OSBALDESTON

I mean, tell them *why* I told you.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Oh! Was there a reason? Let me guess.

NOVELIST

Who is Madame Selenik?

HOSTESS

Charming, don't you think? She is Viennese. Her husband is such an interesting man.

NOVELIST

He looks much older than she does.

MRS OSBALDESTON

He looks very nice.

NORA

Don't you think *she* is?

[*NORA has sauntered over and picked up a small piece of paper dropped by MADAME SELENIK.*]

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*looking both ways, to see if MADAME SELENIK has gone*]

Something *really* exciting happened during dinner.

[*They all look towards MISS PREEDWORTHY and lean forward expectantly.*]

MRS OSBALDESTON

I wonder if it was what I saw?

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*knowingly, peering towards MRS OSBALDESTON*]

Madame Scelenik——

MRS OSBALDESTON [*nodding*]

'M! I thought I wasn't mistaken.

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

Do tell us.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

She received a note during dinner, passed to her, hidden under a plate.

MRS OSBALDESTON [*to the HOSTESS*]

I should *never* have told you myself, Edith.

HOSTESS

Whatever do you mean?

MRS OSBALDESTON

It was from Edward.

HOSTESS

My husband passed a note to Madame——

MISS PREEDWORTHY

You're wrong, Mrs Osbaldeston—quite wrong.

MRS OSBALDESTON

I saw him look at her after she had read it . . . and he smiled.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*very pleased with herself*]

Quite wrong. I saw everything. The note was from that nice young man Richard Meredith.

NORA [*standing up slowly*]

From Richard. Did you say Mr Meredith passed—

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Saw it with my own eyes. I was sitting next to him.

NOVELIST

But surely, ladies, you don't attach any significance to that?

MRS OSBALDESTON [*shaking her head*]

I was sure it was Edward.

HOSTESS [*giving MRS OSBALDESTON quite a severe look*]

I don't think we ought to discuss people who are not here to defend themselves. Please let the matter end there.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

But it didn't. She whispered something to him as she left the dining-room.

MRS OSBALDESTON

What?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

She said, "I'll see you after dinner in the garden." But you ought to have seen his face. It was quite . . . quite . . . vivid!

MRS OSBALDESTON

Don't you mean livid?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

I do not.

HOSTESS

Are you quite sure, Miss Preedworthy?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Quite sure. *I did not mean livid.*

HOSTESS

I mean about the whispered arrangement to meet after dinner in the garden.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Oh, yes. Quite certain.

[NORA gets up and walks extreme L. She is agitated.
The NOVELIST gets up and stands behind her.]

NOVELIST

Don't worry, dear. There's some dreadful mistake somewhere. Of course they've never met before.

MRS OSBALDESTON [to MISS PREEDWORTHY]

Who is the boy you're talking about? Meredith, did you say? We knew a Meredith. Let me think . . . yes . . . Amberville Meredith. When I was a girl we called him Amby. He was at school with my husband, the vicar.

HOSTESS

Amberville Meredith was Richard's father.

MRS OSBALDESTON

Now, fancy that! I wish I'd known. I would have spoken to the boy.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

He's not a boy. Why, he's quite fascinating. Did you notice his dark eyes? Pierced me to the marrow. Gave me such a thrill.

MRS OSBALDESTON

Now I come to think about it, he is like his father. My word, what a man Amby was! If the boy causes as much trouble as his father did——

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Oh, do tell us, dear Mrs Osbaldeston. What sort of trouble?

MRS OSBALDESTON

One doesn't like to mention such things, but it was his way with the opposite sex.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

I know. She means he had 'it.'

MRS OSBALDESTON

It?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Yes, I've read all about it—sex appeal. So now, you know, dear Mrs Osbaldeston, when anyone coyly suggests you have 'it' you will know what to do.

MRS OSBALDESTON

I certainly shall. I shall telephone to the nearest lunatic asylum.

NOVELIST

How right you'd be to do so!

NORA [*quietly*]

So you think, Miss Preedworthy, that there is an understanding between this woman and Richard Meredith?

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*emphatically*]

Most certainly. There can be no doubt about it. Mark my words, they have met before . . . and *not* to discuss the weather. Now, where did she come from?

NOVELIST

Vienna.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

That's it. I remember over dinner he mentioned being stationed in Vienna at one time.

NOVELIST [*looking at NORA*]

Well, couldn't we talk about something else?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Why?

[*The ACTRESS enters quietly from the French windows.*]

MRS BARRY DELAMANE [*leaning lazily against a terrace lamp, smoking*]

Terribly hot to-night. Reminds me of India.

NOVELIST

How long have you been back?

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

Seven weeks. Thank God I'm staying a year! I'm going to have a baby.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*almost choking*]

A baby!

MRS OSBALDESTON

A baby!

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

Yes, that's all, as far as I know. Anyway, I'm told it's not gastritis.

HOSTESS

I think you're very wise, Nelta. India's no place for children. [*Sees the ACTRESS.*] Ah! Where is Madame Selenik?

ACTRESS

She went to powder her nose. Anyway, that was her story.

NORA [*very calm, to MRS BARRY DELAMANE*]

We must get Madame to tell us the story she told you of Vienna.

ACTRESS

It was nothing. She merely asked me if it was considered very wicked here for a married woman to have a lover.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*overjoyed*]

What did I tell you?

NORA

What was her story?

ACTRESS

It was about an Englishman in Vienna. He fell in love with a married woman. The problem was, Should she enjoy her *affaire* in secret or tell her husband and fly with her lover? I said we are only young and desirable once. All power to the woman who has the strength and courage to take what the gods offer!

NORA

Do you really believe that, Hilary?

ACTRESS

Most emphatically. By hook or by crook we've got to *fight* for what we want.

NORA

I see.

[Enter MADAME SELENIK hurriedly.]

MADAME SELENIK

My bag. I lose it. Did you see it? Oh, I must find it. *[She rushes to the chair on which she had been sitting previously, and finds the bag hanging on the chair-back.]* Ah, I am so glad. I am so glad. Excuse.

[She holds the bag to her and turns to exit.]

NORA

You are just in time, Madame Selenik. Were your ears burning?

NOVELIST *[to NORA]*

My dear . . . is it wise to——

NORA *[to MADAME SELENIK]*

Are the men not ready to join us yet?

MADAME SELENIK

'Ow should I know? I do not see them.

NORA

Not even Mr Meredith? You didn't tell us you knew him in Vienna. Why should you make such a profound secret of it?

MADAME SELENIK

There must be some mistake. Why are you all so serious?

NORA *[to the HOSTESS]*

Will you please send for Richard, Aunty? I must get to the bottom of this mystery.

MADAME SELENIK [*agitatedly*]

What right 'ave you to be so inquisitive?

NORA

Every right. Mr Meredith has asked me to marry him.

MADAME SELENIK [*surprised*]

Oh!

NOVELIST [*to NORA*]

Aren't you being rather hasty, dear?

NORA

Not after what Miss Preedworthy saw. [*All look at MISS PREEDWORTHY, who becomes alarmed.*] And Madame dropped this when she was here a few minutes ago. It's in Richard's handwriting.

[Holds out to her aunt the piece of paper she had previously picked up.]

HOSTESS [*reading it*]

I'm sorry, Madame Selenik, but is this true? The note says, "Must see you after dinner."

MADAME SELENIK [*very agitated*]

You do not understand. There must be some mistake.

HOSTESS [*to PHYLLIS, standing behind*]

Will you ask Mr Meredith to join us here at once?

[Exit PHYLLIS. Dead silence follows.]

NORA [*to the NOVELIST, rather bitterly*]

You look like getting your plot after all, Marie.

MRS OSBALDESTON

Much better that everything should be brought out in the open. [*To the HOSTESS*] But perhaps you'd rather we all went? [*But she doesn't offer to move, and MISS PREEDWORTHY makes a gesture of annoyance to her.*] Will anyone have a peppermint?

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*crossing to MRS OSBALDESTON*]

They're only small. May I take two?

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

We had a perfectly dreadful business out in India last year. My husband and I were in Bombay for two months. We heard the whole story. A young sub just out from home was apparently having a lurid *affaire* with his captain's wife. Then it happened at a dance. The husband was drunk, saw his wife with a man in uniform, and shot them both.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

I didn't read that in my *Observer*. But I suppose that's the usual thing to do? Shoot, I mean.

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

Yes. Hasty, boyish creatures, husbands! The captain found out later that he'd shot the wrong man.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Now think of that! Isn't jealousy a monster? Proceed!
[PHYLLIS returns.]

PHYLLIS

Mr Meredith, ma'am. He is not anywhere.

HOSTESS

Not anywhere! How absurd! Find him at once.

PHYLLIS

He is not in the house, ma'am.

[Silence. All look towards MADAME SELENIK.]

HOSTESS

Where are the other gentlemen?

PHYLLIS

All the gentlemen are missing, ma'am.

HOSTESS [haltingly]

All the men are missing!

PHYLLIS

Yes, ma'am. I've been all over. There's not a sign of one.

HOSTESS

Tell James I want him at once.

PHYLLIS

He's gone too, ma'am. They've all gone.

HOSTESS

Do you mean that we are the only people in this house?

PHYLLIS

That's right, ma'am. Excepting for cook and Elsie in the kitchen.

MRS OSBALDESTON

Has the vicar gone too?

ACTRESS [*pointing off stage to L.*]

How odd! I can see moving lights at a great distance. Must be somewhere near the river.

[All gradually drift towards L. of stage, where the terrace wall turns inward to the wall of the house. There is a big drop over this wall, and no exit.]

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Perhaps it's Mr Lancelot doing one of his Boy Scout tricks.

HOSTESS

I must go and investigate.

[Exit the HOSTESS through the French windows, followed by PHYLLIS.]

MRS OSBALDESTON [*the last to join the group to L.*]

Let me see. There's something very peculiar going on.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*climbing on a chair with effort*]

How exciting! Where are the lights?

ACTRESS

Is that something on fire?

MRS OSBALDESTON [*standing on tiptoe*]

I believe it is. Can you see shadowy figures moving, or am I seeing those dreadful spots before my eyes again?

MRS BARRY DELAMANE

I wonder if the men found a burglar in the house? They might have gone in chase.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Oh, dear me! I've *never* seen a burglar.

ACTRESS

Touch wood!

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Oh, yes, I must. [*Does so, and clings to the leg of the table.*
[*The HOSTESS enters hurriedly.*

HOSTESS

It's quite right. There's not a man in the house. It's rather weird. Every room just echoes. I wonder if . . . Could it be a joke? Are they playing some prank on us?

[*She looks round hopefully, expecting that some one will agree with her, but as only silence greets her remark her face drops again.*

MRS OSBALDESTON

The vicar *dare* not play a prank on me.

HOSTESS

If it is a prank, then we'll play one back on them. First I'll ring the police at Ballycudden.

[*Here MISS PREEDWORTHY finds an opportunity to slip out by the French windows.*

NORA

But there's only *one*, Aunty, and it'll take him days to get here. [Enter PHYLLIS.

HOSTESS

We can ask, anyway, what has happened—if a war has broken out or something. Phyllis [*to the maid, who is collecting the coffee things*], will you plug in the telephone?

[PHYLLIS goes to a box on the terrace wall, from which she takes a telephone with a plug attachment,

which she brings forward and plugs in the wall. The HOSTESS lifts the receiver and calls. Exit PHYLLIS, with the coffee things.

HOSTESS

Hello! Hello! [*Long wait.*] Hello!

NOVELIST [*smiling*]

What an extraordinary thing if *all* men suddenly . . . disappeared! Just think a moment. . . .

ACTRESS

I needn't think a second. After my experience the last half-hour I realize life wouldn't be worth living!

HOSTESS

Hello! Hello! That's strange. [*Puts the receiver back slowly. Tense silence. She stands.*] I'll try the house telephone. [*She goes quickly towards the French windows, but stops just before reaching them, and an exclamation escapes her. She rushes back and joins the group.*] Good gracious, the wires have been cut!

MRS OSBALDESTON

Which wires?

HOSTESS

The telephone wires. What are we to do?

[They are not left long in doubt. A rather dashing figure has crept along the terrace from the extreme R. The figure wears black trousers, a dark jersey, a large black felt hat, and a mask. A glittering pistol is held towards the group of women.]

STRANGER [*obviously a woman, but with a deep voice*]

I advise you all to do as I say. [*They are all C. and L., and all turn quickly, rather stunned with surprise.*] And I strongly advise you not to scream out or attempt to move. There's no help within screaming distance, and four of my friends are guarding the house.

HOSTESS

What do you want?

STRANGER

Several things. First of all, sit down . . . just where you are. [*All stand perfectly still.*] Sit down! [*They do so.*] Mrs Osbaldeston, will you sit nearer the group?

MRS OSBALDESTON

He knows me.

STRANGER

I know you each one. I know your value.

HOSTESS

Do you realize what you're doing?

STRANGER

I should do. I planned it all.

HOSTESS

What do you want?

STRANGER

To keep you here for five minutes until the house is searched. We shall not leave much of value anywhere.

[*Hands reach up to clutch necklaces, and some grasp handbags closely.*]

MRS OSBALDESTON

This is dreadful . . . dreadful. Young man, . . . the vicar will be most annoyed.

STRANGER [*laughing*]

Not so much as I shall be if anyone dares to move until I give leave.

MRS OSBALDESTON

What is your errand?

STRANGER

Strange as it may seem, an errand of mercy.

NOVELIST

How curious!

STRANGER

We are friends of the poor. We think there might be a fairer distribution of things. Just an experiment, ladies, an experiment.

MRS OSBALDESTON

A disgusting experiment! You will suffer dearly for this, mark my words . . . brigand! Frightening defenceless women!

STRANGER

This world holds greater terrors than fright, madam. Poverty . . . and with it disease, starvation, and misery.

HOSTESS

Do you realize the dreadful seriousness of what you are doing?

[The STRANGER now takes a large black cloth from her belt and spreads this over the table R. During the following hold-up it is essential that the STRANGER stand slightly back from the table and dominate the crowd of women with the revolver.]

STRANGER

Fully . . . and the risk too, madam; but we don't hesitate. We are a band of poor but enthusiastic friends, ready to help those who are too utterly down to help themselves. If we called in the ordinary way at your doors for charity you'd possibly toss us a silver coin. Now, Mrs Granville Doherty, help to end this unfortunate situation as quickly as possible. Will you kindly place your diamond necklace, your rings, and valuables on this cloth?

HOSTESS

And if I refuse?

STRANGER

You have no alternative. *[Handles gun.]* I advise you to do so as quickly as possible.

[After a hopeless gesture the HOSTESS looks round at the others; then she steps forward and with dignity does as the STRANGER asked.]

HOSTESS

There!

STRANGER

And the contents . . . of your bag, madam.

[Here the following clutch their bags—the ACTRESS, MRS OSBALDESTON, and MADAME SELENIK.]

HOSTESS *[holding her bag upside-down and emptying it out]*
Are you satisfied?

STRANGER

Thank you, madam. *[Bows.]* Return to your seat. Now, Lady Nora, and you *[pointing to MRS BARRY DELAMANE]*. Quickly, please. *[NORA does as her aunt did without question, and returns to the former position. Also MRS BARRY DELAMANE.]* Now our friend the actress from England.

[The ACTRESS steps forward more reluctantly.]

ACTRESS

I have nothing of any value.

STRANGER

I can decide that.

ACTRESS *[hysterically]*

I tell you I have nothing of value. These *[clutching necklace]* are sham.

STRANGER *[taking out a whistle and placing it near mouth]*

Unless you want me to whistle for assistance. A little forcible treatment might help. . . . *[She gives her ornaments sullenly and turns away.]* Your bag.

[More sullenly she empties her bag—lipstick, powder, handkerchief, scent, packet of cigarettes and matches, and a small metal box.]

ACTRESS

You wouldn't object to my having the gaspers and matches? [*Takes both with left hand.*] And this is nothing.

[Takes up the metal box. Her expression is strained and anxious. The STRANGER grips her wrist. She drops the box, which the STRANGER picks up and handles. A pressure on the clasp releases the lid.]

STRANGER

Ah, I expected something you were afraid of losing. Cocaine! How interesting! I've never seen a drug addict before.

ACTRESS

Give it to me.

[The STRANGER does so slowly, as the ACTRESS furtively looks round at the other women before returning to her place.]

[The HOSTESS has been watching her opportunity to dart through the French windows, and while the STRANGER is apparently engrossed with the metal box she does so, to be confronted with another masked figure, which suddenly appears in the doorway and bars her way, holding a gun.]

STRANGER

I'm glad you're wearing your diamonds to-night, Mrs Osbaldeston. [*She starts and frowns.*] Will you oblige with your contribution?

MRS OSBALDESTON [*standing*]

I refuse. Nothing can make me.

STRANGER

Is that so?

MRS OSBALDESTON

I will not.

STRANGER

You may prolong the vicar's return . . . indefinitely . . . if you remain so aloof.

MRS OSBALDESTON

An idle threat.

STRANGER

Perhaps, but you have no choice.

HOSTESS

You had perhaps better do so, Mrs Osbaldeston.

ACTRESS

Are you afraid? Does your bag also contain something . . . *valuable*? For God's sake get it over! I'm damned cold.

HOSTESS

I'm afraid you must.

[MRS OSBALDESTON slowly places her necklace and rings on the table, but clutches her bag. The STRANGER snatches her bag, and before she realizes it quickly empties the contents and throws the bag at her feet. There is a quick exclamation from all. MRS OSBALDESTON seems stunned as the STRANGER lifts a beautiful statuette from the pile.]

HOSTESS

My statue in ivory and gold! Mrs Osbaldeston!

MRS OSBALDESTON

I'm afraid there's some mistake. I can explain. I am . . .
I can—

HOSTESS

There is no explanation necessary.

STRANGER

You must settle your difference afterwards, ladies. It seems we are not alone in our banditry. Your guests as well, madam, are gifted. Now you, madame.

[To MADAME SELENIK.]

[MADAME SELENIK quickly places her valuables on the table, and empties her bag. She holds out a bundle of letters.]

MADAME SELENIK

They are of no use to anyone—just letters.

STRANGER

Letters! If they are of value to you they might be useful to us. Put them there.

MADAME SELENIK

I tell you they are of no value. You cannot make me do this. Oh, please let me keep them!

NOVELIST

You would be well advised to do as we are all doing, Madame Selenik.

MADAME SELENIK

You will be sorry . . . all of you. Others will suffer. It will—

STRANGER

Any more hesitation, and I blow this whistle for assistance.

[MADAME SELENIK drops the letters dramatically on top of the pile and moves slowly away. The NOVELIST quickly takes her place, and immediately puts her large bag on the table over the letters. She lifts up both hands to unfasten her necklace.]

NOVELIST

I'm afraid you'll be very disappointed with my contribution. These are only cornelians. Fortunately most of my jewels are at the bank, and my bag— [She roots in her bag and brings out various articles; she opens the bag wide to display its emptiness, but her left hand is under the bag, securing MADAME SELENIK's letters.] There, that's all!

[Picks up the bag, with the letters underneath, and returns to her former position.]

[*At this moment MISS PREEDWORTHY returns through the French windows. She is rather breathless, and immediately turns to the group of women L., and does not see the STRANGER R.*]

MISS PREEDWORTHY

I've found out. How exciting! I've been running. How strange you all look! Have you seen a ghost? The men . . . I've discovered——

ACTRESS

And you'll soon discover something else. Life is full of little surprises.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

I know where the men have gone. They've gone to the woods by the river at the bottom of the garden.

ACTRESS

There are fairies at the bottom of our garden.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Ah, how clever! You're almost right, but not quite. [*She now faces the women triumphantly, her back to the STRANGER.*] You'll never guess, so I'll tell you. Nude females!

MRS OSBALDESTON

Rude females. Ridiculous!

MISS PREEDWORTHY

A nudist party of foreign girls hiking. [*To the HOSTESS*] It appears that just after we had all left the dining-room your husband received a message to say this rather dreadful party—don't you think?—of women were trespassing, and that they were preparing to camp for the night.

ACTRESS

So that's where the men are? They've gone to put the tents up.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Cook says they rushed like one man. The vicar forgot his hat and coat.

HOSTESS

Why didn't Cook tell me?

MISS PREEDWORTHY

The master, she said, told her not to breathe a word to you.

NOVELIST

So now we know why the men are missing. Prompted by the everlasting spirit of adventure and curiosity—

MRS OSBALDESTON

Adventure! Fiddlesticks! The vicar would never think of the adventure.

ACTRESS

I'll say he wouldn't!

MS. Secoo

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Don't you think it's all dreadfully exciting and adventurous? We ought to be thankful it's nothing worse. I must admit I thought of robbers. [*Shudders. The STRANGER, R. of stage, blows whistle.*] Ah, that's Mr Lancelot blowing his Boy Scout whistle. Now, I wonder what— Oh!

[The second masked figure appears in the French window and remains there.]

STRANGER [*at R. of stage*]

And now, madam, will you step this way?

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*turning to R. of stage and seeing the STRANGER*]

Oh! Oh, my goodness!

STRANGER

Just waiting for your contribution, Miss Preedworthy.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*very flustered*]

My contri—— I . . . why . . . [*Turns to look at the women behind her.*] Am I to guess who it is?

ACTRESS

I don't think it would help you a bit. Just do as you're told.

STRANGER

Put your valuables here, Miss Preedworthy. Why, your necklace alone would be a godsend to a thousand starving families.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*clutching the necklace*]

Oh, but they might be fakes.

STRANGER

The starving families are not, neither is your necklace. You told some one yesterday it was worth eight thousand pounds.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

Can't some one do something!

STRANGER

Let some one try.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*trembling*]

I don't feel a bit nervous. I'm sure there'll be such a surprise in a minute.

HOSTESS

This is not a joke, Miss Preedworthy. Can't you see we're all prisoners?

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*looking from one to another*]

What do you want me to do?

STRANGER

Just put your necklace here.

[*She brings the revolver forward and holds it prominently.*]

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*putting the necklace on the pile*]

Oh! I thought it was a game.

STRANGER

And your bag, madam.

MISS PREEDWORTHY

My bag?

STRANGER

The *contents* of your bag.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*nervous and gushing*]

Oh, nothing really, really. Scraps of paper . . . yes,
scraps of paper! [*Begins to edge away.*]

STRANGER [*fiercely*]

Your bag.

[*Holds out hand.*]

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*handing her bag as though fascinated*]

Oh, dear!

[*The STRANGER empties the bag on the black cloth and returns it to MISS PREEDWORTHY, whose eyes are eagerly on the articles emptied from her bag.*]

STRANGER

You can have your scraps of paper if they are of no value. [*Hands the bag, examines a folded paper, then another; passes them to MISS PREEDWORTHY.*] Betting slips! [*Picks up and examines another paper.*] A note acknowledging receipt of a thousand-pound loan to Edward Granville Doherty.

HOSTESS

What!

MISS PREEDWORTHY

No . . . er . . . yes!

HOSTESS

My husband borrowing money from you!

MISS PREEDWORTHY

He said it was only temporary until the dividends came in from *your* brewery shares.

STRANGER [*who has taken up a small book from the goods emptied from MISS PREEDWORTHY'S bag*]

You can also have this, Miss Preedworthy. [*Reads title*]
What a Young Girl Should Know, in Plain Language.

MISS PREEDWORTHY [*looking round, dismayed*]

Oh, dear! It was Mr Lancelot . . . the Boy Scout! He said I'd be surprised.

HOSTESS

We certainly are.

STRANGER

Thank you, ladies. [*Picks up the black cloth by its four corners and holds it as a bag. Blows the whistle, and the SECOND STRANGER steps forward from the French windows. The black cloth containing the stolen goods is passed from the FIRST STRANGER to the SECOND STRANGER. Then the SECOND STRANGER makes a quick exit R. All this business is done quickly.*] You are still under careful observation. After I am gone count ten before anyone moves. It is important, I assure you. *Count ten!*

HOSTESS

Perhaps you can tell us something about the missing men?

STRANGER [*C., ready for quick exit R.*]

Just a trick, madam, to get them *all* away. [*Laughs.*]

Just a trick. Nudist colony! Ha, ha, ha! Don't forget; count ten. [*Exit the STRANGER R., laughing.*]

HOSTESS [*counting ten slowly. Moving C., speaking severely*]

And now, ladies, knowing one another so much better than we did before, shall we retire to the lounge to *talk things over*? We shall have such a *lot* to tell the men when they return.

[*The HOSTESS sweeps them all with a glance, giving each a different expression, then exits quickly.*]

[*The ACTRESS makes next exit slowly, defiantly.*]

MRS OSBALDESTON follows slowly. Then MRS

BARRY DELAMANE, *and then* MISS PREEDWORTHY, *leaving* MADAME SELENIK *sitting dejectedly* C., *the* NOVELIST R., *and* NORA *extreme* L. MADAME SELENIK *gets up slowly, and moves as in a trance to follow them.*

NOVELIST

Does the loss of those letters mean so much to you, Madame Selenik?

MADAME SELENIK [*turning slowly, sincerely*]

Yes.

NOVELIST

Would you give much to have them returned?

MADAME SELENIK

What do you mean?

NOVELIST

If you'll be frank with us I will return you the letters.

MADAME SELENIK [*dumbfounded, then slowly walking towards the NOVELIST*]

You return my letters? You . . . can do this?

NOVELIST

If you will tell us just how much Mr Richard Meredith is involved with you.

MADAME SELENIK [*to NORA*]

Your *fiancé*.

NORA

Don't mention his name to me.

NOVELIST

Will you please be patient, Nora?

MADAME SELENIK

Ah, no! If you think the letters were from Mr Richard Meredith to me you are quite wrong. [*NORA turns round slowly.*] Those letters were from Richard's *father* to me.

NORA

Richard's *father* . . . you!

MADAME SELENIK

Yes! We meet in Vienna ten years ago. Mr Richard, he find that out when he come to the Embassy in Vienna. He write to me demanding all the letters his father ever wrote me. He say if I do not he will tell everything to my husband.

NOVELIST

I see. Do *you* understand, Nora?

NORA [*whose eyes are moist with tears of happiness*]

Yes, I'm beginning to. . . .

MADAME SELENIK

I was bringing the letters to give to Richard to-night.

NOVELIST [*stepping towards NORA and putting her arm round her*]

You poor dear. What suspicion can do! [*Opens her bag, which contains only the bundle of letters.*] Here are the letters, Madame Selenik.

MADAME SELENIK [*taking the letters*]

Oh, thank you . . . a thousand times . . . thank you. . . .

You took them. How clever! How can I ever thank you?

NOVELIST

Don't try, dear.

[*Holding out her hand.*

[*MADAME SELENIK, after shaking hands, turns away, but NORA rushes after her.*

NORA

Thank you for telling us your story.

MADAME SELENIK

I hope you will be very happy.

[*Kisses NORA.*

[*Exit MADAME SELENIK.*

NOVELIST

Well, Nora, isn't life wonderful after all?

NORA

Yes . . . and full of surprises.

NOVELIST

Yes . . . and full of plots.

NORA

Oh, you don't mean that.

NOVELIST

I've got my plot . . . I've got my characters. The river of inspiration is running again.

NORA

So glad.

NOVELIST

It was a marvellous idea.

NORA

What was?

NOVELIST

The bandits.

NORA [*startled*]

Bandits! Idea! . . .

NOVELIST

I thought of it on the boat coming over. [NORA *stares wide-eyed and speechless.*] I met two down-and-out actresses. They were ready to do anything for money. I thought of the people coming to this house to-night, and wondered how they would behave in a moment of terrific crisis.

NORA [*regaining her speech and smiling weakly*]

Are you quite serious, Marie?

NOVELIST [*nodding*]

Quite. I planned every detail—even the note to your uncle about the imaginary nudists. A natty touch that!

NORA [*stammering with astonishment*]

But . . . the jewels . . . and valuables?

NOVELIST

I arranged all that too! [*Points off R.*] They're leaving them at the end of the terrace wall. Wait. I'll fetch them.

[The NOVELIST exits quickly R. PHYLLIS enters through the French windows.]

NORA

You can lock up on the terrace as soon as we go in.

PHYLLIS

Very good, Lady Nora.

[Enter the NOVELIST, horror-stricken. She is holding a crumpled note, which she hands to NORA. Her hand is pressed to her head, and she appears to be speechless with horror.]

NOVELIST

Oh! Oh! Read that!

NORA [*reading note slowly*]

"Thanks for the idea." What does this mean?

NOVELIST

My God! They've gone! The bandits and the jewels!

QUICK CURTAIN

[illegible]

THE FLAW

By CYRIL ROBERTS

Prize-winning play Welwyn Festival 1935
Adjudicator: JOHN FERNALD

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Cyril Roberts*

CHARACTERS

LILIAN
HUGH MYDDLETON
EDWARD MYDDLETON
MRS MYDDLETON
PHILIP MYDDLETON
BRENDA WARING, *his fiancée*
HARCOURT DENHAM

NOTE

A GRAMOPHONE record of the police radio announcement can be hired from the author's agents.

Applications regarding performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs J. B. Pinker and Son, Talbot House, Arundel Street, Strand, London, W.C.2

THE FLAW

SCENE: *The Myddletons' drawing-room.* TIME: *Late evening.*
Doors back R. and L. Bureau with china cabinet centre back. Couch centre R. Armchairs down-stage L. and up-stage centre L. Radio set R. Bookcase L. Occasional tables with vases of flowers and ornaments L. and centre R. Telephone on table back L. Coffee table up-stage at end of couch.

As the curtain rises LILIAN enters back R. with a tray of coffee, which she places on the coffee table, and pours out three cups. HUGH enters back R. and crosses centre stage.

HUGH

Do the others know the coffee's in here, Lilian?

LILIAN

Yes, sir [*handing him a cup of coffee*]. At least, the master does. I think the mistress has gone upstairs to Mr Philip's room.

HUGH

Again! [*Sits in armchair centre L.*] That's about the eighteenth time to-day. The place must be swept and cleaned and polished out of existence.

LILIAN

Yes, sir. But the mistress loves doing it. Mr Philip and Miss Brenda are rather late.

HUGH

Just a little. [*As she moves to go*] Did you or Cook make this coffee? I bet it was you.

LILIAN

Yes, sir.

HUGH

I shall call on you regularly, Lilian, after you are married, and demand coffee; so you'd better warn your husband. How is the young man, by the way?

LILIAN [*demurely*]

He's very well, sir, thank you. Shall I tell the mistress the coffee's in?

HUGH

Yes, perhaps you'd better.

[*Exit LILIAN L. EDWARD MYDDLETON enters with an evening paper back R.*]

MYDDLETON

Nuisance those two being so behindhand! [*Sits on couch R.*] They ought to have been here an hour ago.

HUGH

Oh, they're all right. [*Rising and going R. to the coffee table*] Coffee?

MYDDLETON

Thanks. [*HUGH passes him a cup of coffee, then reseats himself in the chair centre L. and reads a magazine.*] Your mother's all of a twitter, of course. Sent out about nine-tenths of the dinner to keep hot for them. I got hardly any of that *soufflé*.

HUGH

Bad luck, Father! Especially as they'll probably feed on the way down.

MYDDLETON

They said definitely they'd be here to dinner. I do think it's rather inconsiderate of them, and we waited ages. Don't tell me they're engaged. They've been engaged two years. They ought to have got over the lunacy period by now. Brenda would keep Philip up to

time, anyway. They've probably had some trouble with the car. [*Pause, as he drinks his coffee.*] That coffee of your mother's is getting on my conscience. I suppose I ought to call her?

[*Makes obviously half-hearted attempt to rise.*]

HUGH [*smiling at him and rising*]

I sent Lilian to tell her just now. I'll call her.

[*Goes to door L.*]

MYDDLETON

Well, thanks, if you will.

[*Unfolds newspaper.*]

HUGH [*calling*]

Mother!

MRS MYDDLETON [*off*]

Coming, dear.

[*HUGH sits centre L. again.*]

MYDDLETON

What on earth she'll be like when the wedding-day comes I really do not know. Good job Brenda's mother's dead, or there'd be the devil of a fight. You know, Hugh, there's one thing that consoles me for all this ghastly fuss in the house, and that is that Philip's picked such a winner in Brenda.

HUGH

Yes, Brenda will manage him wonderfully.

MYDDLETON

Manage! I don't know that that's altogether an admirable attribute in a wife. Funny, in a way, the younger son going off first—though I don't know why not. Still—

HUGH

You needn't worry about me, Father.

MYDDLETON

No, I don't think I need. Your mother has never fussed over you, either, as she does with Philip.

HUGH

Perhaps I'm not that sort.

H

MYDDLETON

No; I've always fancied you take after me a bit.

HUGH

Thank you, Father.

MYDDLETON

Very nice of you to take it as a compliment. [*As MRS MYDDLETON enters L.*] Your coffee's cold.

MRS MYDDLETON [*crossing R. to the coffee table*]

It can't be. Besides, I prefer it cold. [*She drains a cup at a gulp.*] Delicious! Just as I like it! Oh, dear, I do hope nothing's happened to them!

MYDDLETON

Good heavens, no! I do wish you'd sit down for a bit, instead of wearing yourself out doing unnecessary things.

MRS MYDDLETON [*fidgeting with the coffee things*]

My dear Edward, I've done absolutely nothing the whole evening, except just now when I went up to put a hot-water bottle in Philip's bed.

MYDDLETON

Hot-water bottle! And you've been cooking those sheets the whole day. They must be a delicate russet colour by now.

MRS MYDDLETON [*moving to the bureau centre back and tidying the papers*]

Don't be silly. Besides, everybody likes to find a hot-water bottle in the bed.

MYDDLETON

Well, he won't need one when he's married.

MRS MYDDLETON

That's very old, and not very funny. Oh, dear, that reminds me. [*Moving towards the door L.*] You really can't trust these girls nowadays.

[*She tidies the books on the telephone table.*]

MYDDLETON [*looking through his paper*]

Of course not, when she does all the work for them.
Hot-water bottle! I never heard of anything so idiotic!

MRS MYDDLETON

Really, Edward!

MYDDLETON

Oh, sorry, my dear. I thought you'd gone.

MRS MYDDLETON

As if that made it any better. Besides, I do not fuss.
I—— [*Door slams off.*] There he is! [*Rushes off L.*

MYDDLETON

Your dear mother! She'll be just the same to the end, bless her! No [*as HUGH rises and moves L.*], let her greet her baby by herself. Sounds sentimental, I know, but he's still that to her, you know. [*HUGH moves to the bureau centre back and puts down his magazine.*] You've never resented that, have you?

HUGH

I? Good Lord, no, Father!

MYDDLETON

I'm so glad about that. Women are funny about some things—even the best of them.

[*MRS MYDDLETON enters L. with PHILIP. Her face is alight with happiness. PHILIP, a young man in the middle twenties, is pale, and obviously labouring under an agitation he is trying hard to control.*

MRS MYDDLETON

Here he is at last. [*They both move L. of the chair up-stage centre L.*] We were getting terribly anxious about you, darling.

MYDDLETON

Well, Philip, my boy, glad to see you.

PHILIP

Hullo, Father! Hullo, Hugh! [*Sits in the chair centre L.*]

HUGH

Hullo, Philip! Where's Brenda?

MYDDLETON

Yes, where's Brenda? You've not come down alone, have you?

PHILIP

Oh, no! She's just putting the car away.

HUGH

Putting the car away! Good Lord, I'd have done that for her. [*He moves slightly L., but stops as PHILIP speaks.*]

PHILIP

No, it's all right. Don't bother. She insisted on putting it away.

HUGH [*moving centre back again*]

Oh, well, if she wanted to. Still it seems rather early to treat her quite so much like one of the family.

PHILIP

No, honestly; she drove the last part, and she said she'd rather finish the job herself. You know how she hates to be fussed. We dumped the bags outside. I waited for her a minute, and then came on in. She won't be a second.

MRS MYDDLETON

You're looking quite pale. I do hate these long journeys by car for you. You're quite knocked up.

PHILIP

Oh, I'm all right. It is a bit tiring, driving all the way.

MYDDLETON

Shouldn't be, with Brenda to give a hand.

PHILIP

No. Still, after a pretty big day at the office.

MRS MYDDLETON

Of course. I expect you're wanting some food. [*Crossing to door back R.*] I've got a nice dinner keeping hot for you.

PHILIP

Oh, don't bother, Mother. We had something on the way down. It was getting so late, and——

MRS MYDDLETON [*moving down R. centre by the coffee table*]

Oh, dear, that is disappointing!

HUGH [*crossing to R. of PHILIP's chair*]

I told them that was probably why you were late.

MYDDLETON

Of course. Very wise, though we *did* wait half an hour for you. [*Rising and moving to the back of the couch*]
Well, Philip, notice anything different about the place?

PHILIP

Different? No. It all looks the same to me.

MYDDLETON

What about this? [*slapping the radio set R.*]. Eh?

PHILIP [*lethargically*]

Oh, yes. That's new, isn't it?

MYDDLETON

Absolutely brand new. I've fallen at last. "When I do have a wireless-set," I said—but you wait.

[*Bending to the set.*]

MRS MYDDLETON

Oh, don't turn that thing on directly Philip comes in dead tired, Edward. You can't think how trying he is, fiddling about every night. "That's Madrid or New York," and you know all the time it's a Welsh sermon from Merthyr Tydfil.

MYDDLETON

I'll guarantee to get you any station——

MRS MYDDLETON

Here's Brenda at last.

[BRENDA, a girl about the same age as PHILIP, enters L.
She is on her guard, self-contained, apparently
well in hand.]

BRENDA [crossing to MRS MYDDLETON R. centre]

Hullo, everybody!

MYDDLETON

Nice to see you again, Brenda.

MRS MYDDLETON [offering her cheek to her in rather a per-
functory manner]

I hear you've had something to eat, my dear. We
expected you to dinner.

BRENDA

Awfully sorry. We took longer on the journey than we
expected. Hullo, Hugh!

HUGH

How are you, Brenda?

BRENDA

I *would* love some coffee, though. So would Philip, I
expect. [Moves nearer to the coffee table.]

MRS MYDDLETON

Of course [picking up the coffee-pot]. No, you mustn't
have that. I'll make some fresh myself [moving to the
door back R.]. There's nothing so horrible as cold coffee.
[Exit back R.]

BRENDA

I ought to go and tidy up, I suppose, but I feel too lazy
at the moment.

HUGH [crossing R. to her]

Cigarette?

BRENDA

Thanks [*taking one*].

HUGH [*holding a light*]

Hullo! Trembling fingers! Alcoholic excess in one so young. For shame!

BRENDA [*crossing R. and sitting on the couch*]

Don't be silly. I'm always like that for a bit after driving.

HUGH

Really! You shouldn't be. Honestly. We'll see what your future husband has to say. Do you hear that, Philip? Philip! [*crossing L. to PHILIP*].

PHILIP

What? Oh, sorry; I didn't hear.

HUGH

Good Lord, man, you look half asleep!

PHILIP

I'm sorry. It's the journey, I suppose.

MYDDLETON

This'll wake you up, my lad. I do want you all to hear this just while your mother's out of the room. Only a bit. Marvellous tone. Now. Sh!

HUGH [*sitting on the right arm of PHILIP's chair and lighting a cigarette*]

We'd better humour him.

MYDDLETON

Shut up! [*Fiddles about with the set. Finds a crooner.*]
Oh, Lord! [*More fiddling about.*] Funny! I usually get something on that mark. Can't hear the bells either. Something must be just coming on.

[*A voice heard from the set: "Before the news summary here are two police messages. The first is as follows: 'Will anyone who witnessed an accident——'"*]

PHILIP

Turn that off, for God's sake!

[Voice continuing: "—between a motor-lorry and a motor-cycle at the Newton crossroads, three miles from Mansfield—"]

PHILIP *[rising and crossing L.]*

Turn the damned thing off!

[MYDDLETON turns the radio off at PHILIP's words.]

MYDDLETON

My dear boy!

BRENDA

Philip! Pull yourself together.

HUGH *[who has risen]*

Good Lord, you've got the absolute shivers! Are you ill, old lad?

PHILIP *[throwing himself into the chair again]*

No, I'm all right. I—oh, my God! *[burying his face in his hands]*.

MYDDLETON

Most extraordinary thing! Never seen you like this before, Philip.

BRENDA *[rising and crossing to PHILIP. HUGH is behind the chair]*

I'd better tell you. You've got to know some time, I suppose. We had an accident.

HUGH

An accident! So that's it. You're hurt, Philip—or you, Brenda?

BRENDA

No.

MYDDLETON

The car, then? But you drove that in all right.

BRENDA

No, not the car. We—knocked a man down.

MYDDLETON

Good Lord!

HUGH

Was he—badly hurt?

BRENDA [*pause, then crossing down to the chair L.*]

He's—dead.

[*Sits.*]

MRS MYDDLETON [*entering back R. with coffee and sandwiches, and going to the coffee table as she speaks*]

I found the kettle boiling for the servants' cocoa, so I stole that for your coffee. It's lovely and hot. Some sandwiches too. [*Looking round*] What's the matter? Philip!

MYDDLETON

Nothing's the matter—much. [*Crossing to her, centre R.*]
Now don't get distressed, please.

MRS MYDDLETON

Something's happened.

MYDDLETON

My dear, really——

HUGH

Mother, Philip and Brenda are quite all right, but they've had a bit of an accident.

MRS MYDDLETON

An accident! [*Crossing L. to PHILIP and kneeling by him*]
Philip, my darling, you're not hurt?

MYDDLETON

No, no, no! Hugh's just said so.

MRS MYDDLETON

Philip, really? Oh, thank God! But—an accident?

HUGH

They unfortunately ran into somebody, and—well—it ended fatally.

MRS MYDDLETON

Ran into—— Not dead? Oh, how horrible!

MYDDLETON [*crossing L. to her and putting his hands on her shoulders*]

Do get up please, please! You'll make yourself ill.

MRS MYDDLETON [*still kneeling*]

Philip, not—not a child?

MYDDLETON [*moving R. to the end of the couch*]

Oh, my dear, as if that were the question!

PHILIP [*speaking with difficulty*]

No, he was an old man—a sort of tramp. I was on him almost before I saw him. Mother—please——

MRS MYDDLETON

But it was an accident, darling. You couldn't help it. Of course it's terrible about the poor old fellow—terrible—but, well, I mean, people are so careless, aren't they, walking in the roads—and you're so careful. Oh, my dear, what a ghastly shock for you! And to think we were blaming you for being late, and all the time you were taking that poor fellow to the—you were able to explain, weren't you? [*Rising and crossing R. to the front of the couch, and speaking to MYDDLETON, who is standing behind it*] There won't be any trouble?

[*Sits on the couch.*]

MYDDLETON

Trouble! I'm surprised we haven't had half a dozen inquiries already. I suppose I should ring up the hospital authorities or the police or some one.

[*Crosses to L. corner to the telephone.*]

BRENDA

I don't think there'll be any inquiries. We didn't take him to the hospital—or anywhere.

HUGH

What!

MYDDLETON [*crossing down between PHILIP and BRENDA*]

I don't understand. [*Pause, then almost in a whisper:*] You left him there?

BRENDA

Yes.

HUGH

Philip!

MYDDLETON

Oh, my boy!

BRENDA

It was my fault.

PHILIP

No!

BRENDA

It was. I was frightened.

HUGH

You, Brenda, frightened!

BRENDA

Yes. I was horribly frightened. Philip wanted to wait till some one came, but I begged him not to. I got into a horrible panic, and made him go on.

MRS MYDDLETON [*rising*]

I'm astounded to hear you say so. You made him! If you'd done what Philip wanted he could have explained the whole thing. [*Moving across L. towards BRENDA*]
You didn't stop in your wicked, selfish panic to think about him.

MYDDLETON [*moving centre to her and stopping her, and taking her back centre*]

My dear!

BRENDA [*rising*]

It was of Philip I was thinking—and of myself, of course—both of us—our future. You see, there was no one to

explain to. No one saw the accident. And he was quite dead.

MYDDLETON

No one saw the accident? But afterwards, later, surely——

HUGH [*crossing R. and putting out his cigarette at the coffee table*]
Where did this happen?

PHILIP [*pulling himself together*]

About a mile this side of Little Upton.

HUGH [*sitting on the couch R.*]

Little Upton? Then you didn't come by the main road?

PHILIP

No. We came round the longer way—the old road. We always do. There wasn't a soul about—even while we were waiting afterwards. Not a soul.

[*The scene comes back to him.*]

HUGH

What time was it?

BRENDA [*crossing to L. of PHILIP and putting her arms round him*]

About an hour and a half ago—nearly.

MYDDLETON [*moving slightly R. towards HUGH*]

It's no good, Hugh. They couldn't get back. Besides, by this time some one's sure to——

MRS MYDDLETON [*swinging round, centre*]

Get back! Are you quite mad? Do you realize it's your own son and brother you're talking about?

MYDDLETON

My dear, we're only trying to think what we ought to do.

MRS MYDDLETON

Nothing, nothing! Oh, I know a dreadful thing's happened, and a dreadful blunder too, going on like

that; but whoever fault that was, it's done now. What good your idea of going back is likely to do I don't know; but one thing I do know—that is, that they're terribly down on people who—well, whom this sort of thing happens to. It might—might even mean prison, mightn't it?

HUGH

Yes, it might, Mother.

MRS MYDDLETON [*crossing L. to PHILIP*]

Philip will regret this terrible thing all the rest of his life. Isn't that enough punishment for an accident—something he couldn't help? [*BRENDA moves down and stands by the chair down L.*] And don't you think we ought to be thankful, perhaps, that it wasn't some one younger? This poor old tramp—only a few more months, and he'd probably be ending his life miserably in a workhouse infirmary. It may sound strange, and I'm not saying it to comfort Philip, but it may have been a merciful ending for a man like that.

PHILIP

He'd have been alive now but for me. I killed him. It was my fault. God! Fancy this happening to me of all people! You hear of hundreds, thousands, of these things. It never crosses your mind that one day you yourself—— [*Turning towards her and throwing his arms around her and burying his face against her*] Mother—you know I wouldn't willingly——

MRS MYDDLETON [*putting her arms around him*]

My dear, my dear, of course not! You were always so gentle, so—you wouldn't hurt a soul. It was an accident, dearest, an accident. [*Looking round wildly*] Oh, what can I say?

MYDDLETON

All this introspection won't get us anywhere. The

question is, What can we do in this frightful situation? The fact that a man's been killed is bad enough. But it's what happened afterwards.

PHILIP

Oh, Father, I've destroyed everything.

MYDDLETON

Now, now, my boy, I don't want to say anything to make matters worse. That won't help. What are we to do *now*? Whatever course one thinks of seems absolutely disastrous. We don't know where we stand. We're utterly helpless, not knowing. I wonder—Denham—I wonder if Denham would come over?

MRS MYDDLETON [*moving centre to him*]

Denham! You mean, to defend Philip? But there's not going to be any need of that. I won't allow you to——

MYDDLETON

No, no, no! Don't jump to conclusions. But he must know about these things. He'll have had experience. He can give us some advice.

HUGH

Are you sure it's a case for—advice?

MRS MYDDLETON [*crossing to the upper end of the couch*]

What do you mean, Hugh?

HUGH

Oh, nothing, Mother. It's all right.

[MRS MYDDLETON *wanders round to the back of the couch.*]

MYDDLETON

Have you a solution for the problem?

HUGH

I, Father? No.

MYDDLETON [*crossing to the telephone table back L.*]

Very well, then. Don't obstruct some one who is trying to do something.

HUGH

I'm sorry, Father. I only meant that if we're going to sit tight and do nothing——

MYDDLETON

Who said we're going to sit tight and do nothing?

HUGH

Well, whatever you—we—decide, do you think it's wise to let in other people on it?

MYDDLETON [*at 'phone*]

Oh, Denham won't talk. He's safe as houses. We play golf together. [*Dials. Holding his hand over the mouth-piece*] I only hope to God he's in. Could I speak to Mr Denham, please? Mr Myddleton. Thank you. Good; he's in.

HUGH

Honestly, I don't see what help it's going to be when you have got him here.

MYDDLETON

Well, I do. If you're strong enough to stand without an expert's advice when you're in trouble I'm afraid I'm not. Don't you see, this business may take all sorts of unexpected turns? How do we—— Oh, that you, Denham? Myddleton speaking. Good evening. Sorry to bother you. I was wondering if you could come over here for a few minutes? Yes, now. I see. Well, it's rather a private matter. No, I can't come over myself. I'll explain why later. I should be most awfully grateful. I'm afraid it can't wait. It really is very urgent. I wouldn't—— [*Puts receiver down.*] He's coming, thank goodness! Says he'll be here in two minutes. Sounded rather fed up, the way he rang off. Still—— H'm! Funny to think I should ever thank heaven for having a lawyer in my house—professionally, I mean. Are you

all right, my dear? [*noticing that MRS MYDDLETON has collapsed on HUGH's shoulder*].

MRS MYDDLETON

Yes, I'm all right.

MYDDLETON [*crossing R. to the end of the couch*]

I was afraid of this. Better get a spot of brandy, Hugh.

MRS MYDDLETON [*stopping HUGH as he attempts to rise*]

No, no! I was just overcome for a minute. We were all so happy, Philip going to be married so soon, and then this dreadful thing happens. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! [*Sobs.*]

PHILIP [*leaning over the back of the couch and putting his arms around her*]

Oh, Mother, can you ever forgive me, bringing all this on you?

MRS MYDDLETON [*trying to pull herself together*]

There, I'm all right now. It was selfish of me to be so silly. I'm sorry.

HUGH

I wish you'd lie down for a bit, Mother.

MRS MYDDLETON

No.

MYDDLETON

Best thing you could do.

MRS MYDDLETON

No. I won't be away while that man's here. He'll make you do something dreadful—I know he will. I won't have Philip's whole career and happiness sacrificed for some silly idea of reparation for something that can't be mended. Do you hear, I won't?

MYDDLETON

My dear, give me credit for some feeling for Philip. We only want this man's help. Philip!

PHILIP

Please do what they want, Mother.

MRS MYDDLETON

You want me to go, Philip?

PHILIP [*assisting her to her feet*]

Please. It'll be easier for me if you're not here, Mother.

MRS MYDDLETON [*crossing L. assisted by PHILIP*]

Very well, my dearest, if you wish it. [*Leaving PHILIP and crossing centre to MYDDLETON*] You promise you'll do nothing to endanger Philip?

MYDDLETON [*putting his arm round her*]

Of course, of course. Perhaps Brenda would go up with you?

HUGH

I'm sorry, Father, but I think Brenda ought to be here.

MRS MYDDLETON

Yes, there's nothing to bother about. I'm sorry I was so silly just now.

MYDDLETON

Sure you'll be all right?

MRS MYDDLETON

Quite sure. I won't lie down. Better doing something. [*Crossing to the coffee table and picking up the tray*] I'll find something to do in the kitchen. [*At the door back R.*] You won't forget? [*Exit.*]

MYDDLETON

She'll soon be all right. Take her mind off things, pottering about in the kitchen. [*He fidgets about, picking up the paper and putting it down, and pacing up and down back-stage.*] H'm, yes. Long time that fellow's taking. Practically next door. Said he was coming at once. [*BRENDA sits in the chair down-stage L.*] Sorry to keep you here, Brenda. I expect you're feeling pretty well all in.

BRENDA

No, I'm quite all right.

MYDDLETON

You've stood up to it pretty well, I must say. [*A door bangs in the distance.*] Hark! That sounds like Denham now. [LILIAN enters L.]

LILIAN

Mr Denham, sir.

[*She stands aside as DENHAM enters L. Exit LILIAN L.*
[DENHAM is a spruce, likeable, talkative man of middle age, in a dinner-jacket.]

MYDDLETON

Extraordinarily good of you to come over, Denham.

DENHAM [*crossing centre to MYDDLETON and shaking hands*]

Well, I must say I feel it's a distinctly Christian action. I had just picked up the only decent hand I've had for months—six spades with three top honours, and all sorts of other jam—and then came your ring. Did I bless you? I suppose they'll want a fresh deal when I get back. [PHILIP, who has wandered to the bookshelf L., bangs the cigarette-box lid.] Hullo, Philip! Didn't know you were coming down. Hullo, Hugh!

[HUGH, who has risen, is standing behind the couch R.]

MYDDLETON

I don't think you've met Philip's *fiancée*, Miss Waring. Brenda, this is Mr Denham.

BRENDA

How do you do?

DENHAM

How d'ye do? I was wondering if I should meet you before the great event. Pretty soon now, isn't it? I must look out my antique topper. Rare old vintage! Goes back to the naughty 'nineties. You'll love it.

MYDDLETON

Won't you sit down?

DENHAM [*crossing to the couch and sitting*]

Well, my lad, what's this mysterious business of yours? You know, Miss Waring, this fellow's always getting bits of information out of me on the sly, doing me out of my six and eightpence. No wonder so many lawyers are on the dole! [HUGH *hands him the cigarettes over the back of the couch.*] Thanks, Hugh. I will have a cigarette. [HUGH *lights it for him.*] Well, let's get busy. What is it? Some one else been raiding the chickens, eh?

MYDDLETON

I'm afraid it's something rather more serious than that.

DENHAM [*altering his manner*]

I see. In that case, perhaps you'd rather you and I—eh? [*half rising*].

MYDDLETON

No, we'd better stay here. It's something that affects all of us.

DENHAM

Oh! Well, very sorry if there's any trouble. I'll be very glad to be what help I can, of course.

MYDDLETON

I knew you would. Denham, this is in the very strictest confidence.

DENHAM

My dear fellow, of course!

[HUGH *sits in the chair down R.*]

MYDDLETON

Philip and Brenda are quite uninjured, but they had an accident on the way down from town—a fatal accident. A man—an old tramp fellow—was—killed.

DENHAM

Killed! Phew! I say, that's bad, isn't it? Tough luck—very tough!

MYDDLETON

Awful thing to happen.

DENHAM

Yes, yes, terrible. Better tell me what you can about it. Where was it?

HUGH

Little Upton, nearly two hours ago.

DENHAM

I suppose you'll have no difficulty proving it was an accident? What do the police think, or the doctor, or whoever they had to see? I suppose they've got their witnesses?

MYDDLETON

It's frightfully hard to explain. I—God, this is awful!
[*Moves R. to the end of the couch.*]

DENHAM

Well, well? I must know if I'm to be of any help.

BRENDA [*rising and crossing R. and standing by the coffee table*]

Mr Denham, why you've been called over here I don't know. I imagine Mr Myddleton wanted your advice, or felt he must share the secret with some one else. As it is, he merely seems to have left us high and dry and to be wasting your time. This is what happened. Philip and I entirely lost our heads. We did what was no doubt a very foolish thing. We didn't wait to do anything about the accident. We drove on.

DENHAM

I beg your pardon? What did you say?

BRENDA

We didn't do anything. We left him there. We drove on.
[*Pause.*]

DENHAM

Is this a joke? Philip, for heaven's sake say something!
This isn't true?

PHILIP [*standing at the back of the chair down R.*]

Yes.

BRENDA

We realize now it was a terrible mistake.

DENHAM

Mistake! Some people employ cruder words in cases where motorists cut and run—juries, for instance.

BRENDA

Very likely, but—I'm afraid it's done now.

DENHAM [*rising and putting out his cigarette at the coffee table and standing R. of her*]

Miss Waring, you said just now you didn't quite see why I was asked here. I agree with you. If there was any question of my taking up the case—well, frankly, I don't know that I should care to.

MYDDLETON [*at the back of the couch*]

We thought you could advise us—tell us where we stand.

DENHAM

Oh, I can tell you that easily. You stand in a very unenviable position indeed.

BRENDA

I don't think you quite understand yet, Mr Denham. You talked about witnesses. There were no witnesses. From first to last, from the time when the accident happened, and all the time when we were waiting by the roadside till we—till I persuaded Philip to drive on, there was not a single witness of any kind.

DENHAM

I see. I think I see what you're getting at now.

BRENDA

I can't expect you to sympathize——

DENHAM

It's difficult.

BRENDA

Yes, but—even you can't think we'd have left him if he'd been alive?

DENHAM

You think that lets you off? And how do you know he was dead?

BRENDA

I've not seen much of death, but I'm afraid there's no doubt. He was dead. When we got out—but I can't talk about that. We hit him a terrible blow. I couldn't straighten one of the headlights. The front of the car was pretty awful. I—I cleaned that up just now with rags in the garage.

DENHAM [*with reluctant admiration*]

Did you—did you really? You were going pretty fast you say—fifty, sixty?

BRENDA

I don't know.

DENHAM

Were you sober, Philip?

BRENDA [*moving L. towards PHILIP and standing by the chair up-stage centre L.*]

He was perfectly sober.

DENHAM

Philip!

PHILIP

I had two or three whiskies up at that new roadhouse on the main road.

BRENDA

Two, Philip.

DENHAM

Single?

PHILIP

No.

DENHAM

About two hours ago, you say? A nasty light, just betwixt and between.

PHILIP

Yes. I'd just put on my headlights. Then I saw him right in front.

DENHAM

I suppose he wasn't drunk? Not very likely, of course, at that time. If it had been ten o'clock, now—I mean, did he sway out into the middle of the road or anything?

BRENDA

Well——

PHILIP

We can't say that, Brenda. [BRENDA sits in a chair.

DENHAM

H'm! Well, in ordinary circumstances you might have a reasonable case. As it is, you've put yourselves in an utterly hopeless position.

MYDDLETON

Isn't there anything we can do?

DENHAM

Do? Of course there's something you can do—but that's not my business. You seem to have pretty well decided, haven't you? Well, you may get away with it. I must go.

MYDDLETON

Denham, I beg you——

DENHAM

My dear fellow, I've got guests waiting. You can't expect me to stay here all night.

MYDDLETON

No.

DENHAM

I'm sorry. I know it's a beastly mess for you all. [*Moves slightly L.*] By the way, you'll remember I know nothing at all about this—absolutely nothing. You've put me in a pretty awkward situation.

[*Moves towards the door L.*]

MYDDLETON

Of course. [*Moves L. towards DENHAM.*] May I walk along with you a bit?

DENHAM [*at the door L.*]

I don't see the use. Oh, yes, yes, of course, if you want to. [*MYDDLETON joins him. Exeunt L.*]

BRENDA [*rising and putting out her cigarette at the coffee table*]

So that stupid farce is over. And where are we now?

HUGH

Where indeed?

BRENDA

Well, was it the slightest use?

HUGH

Not the slightest.

[*PHILIP makes a restless movement, and has a fit of trembling.*]

BRENDA [*moving L. towards PHILIP*]

Philip, are you all right?

PHILIP [*crossing centre in front of BRENDA*]

Yes, I'm all right.

HUGH

Why don't you go out and talk to Mother for a bit? It would be a help to her.

PHILIP [*moving towards the door back R.*]

Yes—yes, I think I will.

HUGH

And give yourself a drink first—a good stiff one.

PHILIP [*as he exits R. back*]

Thanks, Hugh, I will.

HUGH [*as BRENDA makes a move to follow PHILIP he rises and goes to her L. centre*]

Brenda! He'll be better by himself for a bit. I should think you could do with a drink yourself.

BRENDA

I will presently.

[*Sits again in the chair centre L.*]

HUGH

You're pretty marvellous, you know.

BRENDA

Thanks. May I have another cigarette, please?

HUGH [*offering his case*]

Of course.

BRENDA

Isn't that the case I gave you?

HUGH

It is [*giving her a light*].

BRENDA

You haven't lost it yet, then?

HUGH

I should say not!

BRENDA [*looking up at him*]

Well, Hugh?

HUGH

Well?

BRENDA

You don't imagine I haven't realized what you've been thinking all the time while you've been sitting there so

quietly. I know quite well. I could feel waves of disapproval—hostility—coming over to me.

HUGH

My dear, I assure you I wasn't conscious of any such thing. One feels too utterly flattened out by this whole wretched business for anything like that.

BRENDA

Let's not pretend, Hugh. You despise me for my behaviour.

HUGH

No.

BRENDA

Yes. You despise me. And—I don't care. I've thought this out very carefully, and I know I'm right. Hugh, I love Philip.

HUGH

I know you do, Brenda.

BRENDA

I love him. I want him. I'd do anything not to lose him. And what's happened isn't going to spoil my life with him as we'd planned it.

HUGH

Why should it do that—whatever he does in the end?

BRENDA

Don't talk like a fool! You admitted yourself just now what the consequences might be if—if it gets known. Utter ruin! [*Rising and moving centre to him*] And you're against us—against Philip and me. You are. Oh, I've always been able to read your mind pretty well. You think he should do the noble, self-sacrificing thing, and give himself up.

HUGH [*moving R. and sitting on the couch*]

Why talk like a movie play?

BRENDA

Never mind how I put it. You do, don't you? [*He is silent.*] Well, that's your idea. You look down on me, no doubt [*crossing R. and standing by the couch*], but let me tell you I hate and despise your standards too. I think they're stupid and cruel. I loathe all that schoolboy stuff—'pukka sahibs' and 'stout fellas.' It nauseates me. I loathe the attitude of people like you who set up some hideous Moloch called reparation, and sacrifice anybody, anything, to it. If you don't think of Philip or of me, have you thought of your mother?

HUGH

Yes.

BRENDA

She was right this evening. [*Moving up centre stage*] That poor fellow we killed—it was a frightful thing [*swinging round to face him*—but we can't bring him back. And because of the death of that poor old down-and-out you want to destroy—how many people?—and for what good in the end? [*Moving to the chair centre L.*] Your father's just the same as you. He's terrified of the disgrace and publicity, of course, and half tempted to take my way out, but in his heart of hearts he's horrified at what we did. You know, Hugh, women often see things clearer than men do.

HUGH

Some things.

BRENDA

You were right just now. I wasn't frightened—not after the first horrible shock. [*Sitting on the arm of the chair*] I suddenly saw things very clearly. It was our fault. We—Philip was driving recklessly, utterly recklessly. Any intelligent person would be able to tell it was no ordinary accident from heaps of things—at least, I

thought so—and Philip would be sure to give himself away; so when he was dithering about and suddenly went all panicky I did nothing to stop him. I encouraged him to drive on. I can make Philip do most things I want——

HUGH

Almost anything——

BRENDA

And with a bit of pluck and common sense and avoidance of useless sentiment we can go on and forget this terrible thing that's happened. Every hour that passes makes any other course impossible. [*Rising and crossing R. to the couch*] So there we are. And—I'm not afraid of what you think. And now [*sitting on the couch*], please, I feel rather like that drink you mentioned.

HUGH [*rising and crossing behind the couch to the door back R.*] Right. There is just one thing I'd like to say.

BRENDA

Now? Do you mind? After all, I'm not made of stone—and that business in the garage wasn't very—pretty.

HUGH [*returning and standing behind the couch*]

It must have been horrible—utterly horrible—but, Brenda——

BRENDA

Oh, well?

HUGH

I realize you've made up your mind, and I think, as Denham said, you'll quite likely get away with it.

BRENDA

I'm not afraid of words. Well?

HUGH

What I'm not so sure of is that happy-ever-after business you're so set on.

BRENDA

I see. We get a sermon now, do we?

HUGH [*moving centre stage*]

No, no. I don't want to be the stern moralist, God knows! This horrible business affects us all. But—those standards you hate so much—I don't surrender them, but we'll set them aside. I'll just ask you this. [*Moving to the upper end of the couch and looking down at her*] How well do you know Philip?

BRENDA

He's going to be my husband.

HUGH

I know Philip better than anybody else in the world. We're not very like in some things, but I could tell you everything he's thinking any time you liked. It is as though I could look right into his mind. You must believe this. We've always been together, done the same things—nursery, school, shared the same room. Philip's very introspective, worries horribly over things. You see him often gazing into space, quite lost, working out something. That's part of him. You can't alter it.

BRENDA

I could make him forget.

HUGH

Sometimes. Especially at first. Not so much later. You'd have to get used to something rather hard to bear—seeing Philip get farther and farther away from you, obsessed by the horror of remorse. Oh, he wouldn't worry you with it. He loves you too much. But it would be there. You won't like to meet that look in his eyes, Brenda—that look which tells you he'd welcome almost anything to give him peace. This is true. For God's sake, believe me, Brenda! You see, I'm saying

this because I'm thinking not of Philip's safety, not of Philip's career, but of—Philip.

BRENDA [*rising and crossing down L.*]

Philip's ruin—Philip's disgrace—Philip's life spoilt for your idol—reparation!

HUGH [*following her down L.*]

Not idol, Brenda. An idol has no help to give.

BRENDA

I like your idea of help! What help is it to be to Philip in the end? You know his nature so well—yes, you're right about that—but it's done. Nothing can wash away remembrance. You make his burden worse for nothing.

HUGH

Repentance, submission, penance! Haven't people ever found healing in those? Doesn't even this hard world say, "Well, he's paid"?

BRENDA

Paying the penalty! Yes, that's what you want to see your brother doing.

HUGH

Better than seeing his spirit die—daily, before your eyes. [*PHILIP enters back R. and drops down behind the couch to the footlights.*] Well, old lad, Mother bearing up?

PHILIP

I think she'd like to talk to Brenda a minute.

BRENDA [*looking at HUGH*]

No.

HUGH

Not afraid, Brenda?

BRENDA [*as she crosses R. to PHILIP*]

No, Hugh, I'm not in the least afraid. [*Putting her arms round PHILIP*] Philip, you do love me, don't you?

PHILIP

Oh, Brenda, you know I do.

BRENDA

You'll remember that, all through everything? Hold tight on to that thought?

PHILIP

Yes.

BRENDA

I'll see your mother. [*She moves up to the door back R.*]
No, Hugh, I'm not afraid. [*Exit.*

[*PHILIP throws himself on to the couch, near the foot-lights.*

HUGH [*crossing R. to PHILIP and offering him a cigarette*]

Feeling better, old lad? You were a bit knocked over, weren't you? What about a cigarette?

[*PHILIP takes a cigarette, fidgets with it, then tears it up.*

PHILIP

What am I to do? Tell me, help me, Hugh!

HUGH [*putting his hand on PHILIP's shoulder*]

Dear old lad, how can I do that?

PHILIP

I can't get over it—can't realize it yet—this happening to me, I mean. Everything was so marvellous—going to be married in a few weeks. You know, sometimes when you're having a good time you feel whatever happens to others, pain, sickness, they somehow can't touch you.

HUGH

I know.

PHILIP

Well, I was like that, right on top of the world. I was letting out the car for all I was worth—it was that long stretch through the woods—I didn't care a damn. And I shouldn't have had those drinks, Hugh. I can't stand it.

I wasn't tight, but it just made the difference. You know, muzzy. [*Rising and crossing to centre*] Damned fool! I asked for trouble all right. And then—I saw him. Suddenly, as though he leaped out of the ground, just in front of my face, like that, he was—there. My God, Hugh, I'll never get that picture out of my mind—his shoulders and his grey hair under his cap, all framed in a horrible white light! [*burying his face in his hands*].

HUGH [*crossing to PHILIP and putting his hand on his arm*]
Look here, Philip, do you think this——

PHILIP

I felt the blow; I heard Brenda scream. I went on for—I don't know how long—hanging on to the wheel in a sort of daze. Then we stopped—we must have carried him for yards. That was awful enough. But after—oh, if I could only forget! I must have been quite mad.

HUGH

You were thinking of Brenda, weren't you?

PHILIP [*crossing to the chair up-stage L.*]

Oh, God, I don't know! I was the one. It's different for a girl. With all the chances I've had—Mother and Father and you—[*crossing to HUGH and holding his arms*]—I forgot everything. I cut and ran. All the people I've looked on as outsiders, thought utterly beneath me—not one of them would have done what I did. I'm utterly rotten. Oh, Hugh! [*crossing R. to the couch and throwing himself on it, burying his head, and breaking down*].

HUGH [*walking to the back of the couch, thinking deeply. He leans over the back and puts his hand on PHILIP*]

Do you remember, ages ago, two small kids down in Cornwall whose nurse had gone to sleep by the rocks? They'd wandered away over the sands. Gosh, I can see that sandbank still! And when they'd finished playing

they looked round, and there was nothing but sea between them and safety. One of them was a little skunk. He roared himself hoarse. That was all he did. The other dragged him along, though the water was up to their necks—and they got there. The little skunk wasn't the younger brother, Philip [*walking away to the upper end of the couch*].

PHILIP [*raising his head*]

But this has happened! It's happened!

HUGH

You're the same person you were then, Philip, really. That water was pretty deep, wasn't it—but we got there all right. And *you* did it.

PHILIP [*sitting up*]

Brenda——

HUGH [*putting both hands on PHILIP's shoulders*]

You're going to think for yourself, aren't you, sometimes? You've got pretty nearly a lifetime ahead of you.

PHILIP

I know. That's it.

HUGH

Philip, my dear brother, you know I think only for your happiness, for both of you.

PHILIP

Yes, I know. [*BRENDA enters back R. and moves down to the back of the couch near the footlights.*] [*Turning and looking up at BRENDA*] Brenda, I can't go on. I must——

BRENDA

I see. You won't stick it out? Very well, Philip—go ahead. [*PHILIP rises, crosses to the telephone back L., and dials.*] So you've won, Hugh, after all?

HUGH [*looking at her*]

It wasn't I. [*They both look towards PHILIP as he speaks.*]

PHILIP

Hullo! I want the police-station, please. Yes, the police.

[*Slow curtain as PHILIP is speaking.*]

UNKNOWN DIMENSION

By HARRY PENSON

Prize-winning play Buxton Festival 1936

Adjudicator: JOHN BOURNE

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Harry Penson*

CHARACTERS

QUEEN ANNE'S PAGE

A YOUNG MAN, *afterwards known
as John*

THE VICAR'S SISTER

MR MURGLE

ADAM BROWN

JILL

ST CATHARINE OF ALEXANDRIA

*Applications regarding performances of this play should be
addressed to Messrs J. B. Pinker and Son, Talbot House, Arundel
Street, Strand, London, W.C.2*

UNKNOWN DIMENSION

The setting of this play is very simple. Centre stage and well forward is a seat or form. The sort of seat that is prevalent in public parks will do. Over left and well up-stage is a sign-post. There are directions indicated on it, but they are indistinct. The lighting required is dim, but there should be a spotlight directed on to the form. The back of the stage must be dim, and the producer should try to give the illusion of distance and depth. Every character must wear rubber-soled shoes, or the entire stage should be covered with a thick carpet. Everybody must move silently. During the entire action of the play figures of men and women move occasionally across the back of the stage, well in the shadow, from right to left. There is a man asleep on the form. His dress is rather fantastic. He is QUEEN ANNE'S PAGE, and is neither young nor old. At times he seems foolish, and at other times appears to be weighed down with a burden of bitterness. A young man enters from the right, and after one or two movements of indecision goes up to QUEEN ANNE'S PAGE.

YOUNG MAN

I say! I'm awfully sorry to disturb you, but can you tell me——

PAGE

Oh, go away!

YOUNG MAN

But, really, it's most important. Have you see a young lady pass this way?

PAGE

Yes, I have.

YOUNG MAN

Well—er—which way did she go? Did she inquire for me? [*The PAGE has apparently gone to sleep. The young man walks over to the signpost again, but cannot decide which way to go. He comes back to the PAGE.*] I hope you won't mind, but I do wish you'd talk to me for a minute.

PAGE

You still here?

YOUNG MAN

Yes. You see it is fearfully important. We'd promised to go together, and somehow I've lost her.

PAGE

Have you? Is she your wife?

YOUNG MAN

Er—no. In a way—er, yes.

PAGE

I see.

YOUNG MAN

You couldn't mistake her, I'm sure. She's tall and rather slim, with an inquisitive little nose, and a mouth like—like—it's a pathetic little mouth sometimes. Her name is Jill.

PAGE

Is your name Jack?

YOUNG MAN

No, John.

PAGE

Well, I can't help you. Nobody helps me.

JOHN

Yes, but, I say——

PAGE

You can stay here if you like. I shan't stop you. Crowds of people pass this way.

JOHN

I don't think it is any good waiting here.

PAGE

Neither do I. Go away!

JOHN

Have you been having a night out?

PAGE

Yes.

JOHN

You look as if you'd been to a fancy-dress ball and can't find your way home.

PAGE

I can't. I'm lost.

JOHN

Sorry. Not much use asking you the way.

PAGE

No harm in asking.

JOHN

I say, why don't you try to find the way?

PAGE

I have tried. Other people manage it, but I seem fated to fail.

JOHN

Try again! It's no good sitting there and getting bitter about it.

PAGE

Isn't it?

JOHN

Of course it isn't.

PAGE

When you have been about here for as long as I have you'll be bitter.

JOHN

Surely it's perfectly simple? There's the signpost. What's the trouble?

PAGE

I started wrong, I suppose.

JOHN

Sorry and all that, but really I must go. If Jill comes this way tell her to hurry, won't you? Send her after me [*going*].

PAGE

Oh, all right. I shall probably be here when you come back.

JOHN

Cheerio! Don't forget.

[He goes off up-stage. The page lies on his back full length on the bench. A lady, the VICAR'S SISTER, enters R. She is dressed in a very prim manner, and is wearing spectacles. She advances to the bench and surveys the PAGE. He grins at her.]

PAGE

Is your name Jill?

VICAR'S SISTER

Good gracious, no!

PAGE

I thought not, but you never know, do you?

VICAR'S SISTER

What?

PAGE

I don't know.

VICAR'S SISTER

I've no time to waste here with you. Will you please

tell me which way I must go? I can't quite understand how I got here, but it is most important that I should get home quickly.

PAGE

What's the hurry?

VICAR'S SISTER

I can't discuss that with you. My brother, the vicar, is expecting me, and I have a committee meeting of the Service Circle after tea. It really is most unfortunate.

PAGE

It is.

VICAR'S SISTER

I must hurry. I don't remember seeing you before. Do you live in this parish?

PAGE

This parish?

VICAR'S SISTER

I mean, are you in my brother's parish?

PAGE

Do you know where you are?

VICAR'S SISTER

No, I don't. I've been asking you for the last half-hour.

PAGE

Don't exaggerate.

VICAR'S SISTER

I shall speak to my brother, the vicar, about you. I think you should go home and change your things. You are very rude.

PAGE

You shouldn't say silly things.

VICAR'S SISTER

Who are you?

PAGE

Queen Anne's page.

VICAR'S SISTER

What?

PAGE

Must I repeat it?

VICAR'S SISTER

Don't be ridiculous!

PAGE

I know I look silly, but I'm not half as silly as I look.

VICAR'S SISTER

I should hope not.

PAGE

Well, if you'd wandered around here for as long as I have you'd probably look just as silly.

VICAR'S SISTER

Why don't you go home?

PAGE

Can't find the way.

VICAR'S SISTER

You can't have tried very hard.

PAGE

You see, the paths keep changing. I do my best, but somehow or other I land back here every time.

VICAR'S SISTER

You are lost!

PAGE

I am, and I'm so tired.

VICAR'S SISTER

What am I going to do?

PAGE

Oh, carry on.

VICAR'S SISTER

Which way?

PAGE

Now what is the good of asking me?

VICAR'S SISTER

I can't make out what it says on the signpost, and I'm sure I've never been here before.

PAGE

You haven't.

VICAR'S SISTER

I'm afraid. What must I do?

PAGE

Go over to the signpost and search for your destination. It may be years before you get there.

VICAR'S SISTER

Do you mean that——

[She is interrupted by the entrance from the left of an elderly little man. He is wearing a well-cut velvet jacket and a flowing bow. He is rather old-fashioned and very polite. He is MR MURGLE.]

MR MURGLE

How do you do? Ah, pray introduce me, introduce me!

PAGE

You here again? I thought you had managed it this time.

MR MURGLE

Introduce me, boy.

PAGE

This is Mr Murgle. Mr Murgle—er—the vicar's sister.

VICAR'S SISTER

Good afternoon.

MR MURGLE

How do you do, madam? Delighted, I'm sure. Won't you sit down?

VICAR'S SISTER

Thank you.

MR MURGLE

Quite a nice afternoon, isn't it?

VICAR'S SISTER

Yes, it is. Have you been here before?

MR MURGLE

Yes, often.

VICAR'S SISTER

Then perhaps you can tell me the way home?

MR MURGLE

Don't worry, madam, I'll do my best to show you the way.

VICAR'S SISTER

Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. This fellow here is very rude. In fact, I suspect he is—er, well—just a little mad. He has been saying the most extraordinary things.

MR MURGLE

Don't let him upset you. Of course, there may be a modicum of truth in what he says, but truth is often unpleasant.

VICAR'S SISTER

You see, I must get back for tea. I have a most important committee meeting, and I hope to be able to assist my brother with his sermon to-morrow.

MR MURGLE

To-morrow?

PAGE

There are no to-morrows.

VICAR'S SISTER [*with a little laugh*]

Ah, yes. I know. To-morrow never comes!

MR MURGLE

Well, I shouldn't bother too much about to-morrow. After all, it is as well that your brother should get used to managing without you.

VICAR'S SISTER

Is it? Why?

MR MURGLE

Well, dear lady, you will not always be with your brother.

VICAR'S SISTER

But he relies upon me so much, and I'm devoted to him. He insists on my making his cocoa every night. He won't let Annie do it. Annie is our little maid.

PAGE

He'll get used to it. They all do.

VICAR'S SISTER [*confidentially, to MR MURGLE*]

I shall not take any notice of him. He says he is Queen Anne's page.

MR MURGLE

He was.

VICAR'S SISTER [*laughing*]

Ah, yes—yes. Of course, Queen Anne is dead.

PAGE

We all are.

VICAR'S SISTER

I do wish he would go. Do you think he is dangerous?

MR MURGLE

No, he is not dangerous—rather difficult to deal with sometimes. I'm rather sorry for him.

VICAR'S SISTER

Do you think I might go now? I do so want to be in time for tea.

MR MURGLE

Why, yes, dear lady. May I help you?

VICAR'S SISTER

I shouldn't dream of taking you out of your way, but, of course, if you insist upon coming with me—well—I couldn't say no.

PAGE

That was my trouble.

MR MURGLE

Mine also.

VICAR'S SISTER

Really—I—er—you do say funny things! I'd rather like you to meet my brother.

MR MURGLE

I look forward to meeting him.

PAGE

You will meet him—one day.

VICAR'S SISTER

Oh, do let us go! To hear this man talk anybody would think there had been a funeral.

[She stands, and MR MURGLE offers her his arm, and they go off together. A number of other people pass through at the back, among them a young man, ADAM BROWN, wearing grey flannel trousers, no jacket, and a vivid yellow shirt. He crosses the stage, and then returns to QUEEN ANNE'S PAGE.]

ADAM BROWN

Greetings, comrade. I'm Adam Brown.

PAGE

What do you want?

[They shake hands.]

ADAM BROWN

Liberty, equality, fraternity.

PAGE

All at once?

ADAM BROWN

Which means revolution.

PAGE

Don't be a fool!

ADAM BROWN

Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!

PAGE

All contradictions!

ADAM BROWN

Liberty!

PAGE

Forge your own chains.

ADAM BROWN

Equality!

PAGE

Drag down the other chap.

ADAM BROWN

Fraternity!

PAGE

Based, I suppose, upon the parable of the Prodigal Son.
Indicating the fatted calf.

ADAM BROWN

Principles to save the world.

PAGE

The world doesn't want saving.

ADAM BROWN

The world must be saved. Join our movement——

PAGE [*interrupting*]

And wear a yellow shirt?

ADAM BROWN

The emblem of liberty——

PAGE

Equality!

ADAM BROWN

Fraternity!

PAGE

I wonder!

ADAM BROWN

Be our comrade. Wear a yellow shirt.

PAGE [*bitterly*]

What matters it if your heart is full of fear and covetousness? It's the colour of your shirt that is most important.

ADAM BROWN

Who are you?

PAGE

Like you, I am a seeker after that which I cannot find.

[MR MURGLE *enters right*. ADAM BROWN *slaps him heartily on the back*.

ADAM BROWN

Greetings, comrade!

MR MURGLE

How do you do?

PAGE

What has happened to the vicar's sister?

MR MURGLE

She found the way, and has gone on.

ADAM BROWN

Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!

MR MURGLE

O—er—yes—certainly—of course—er—hear, hear!

ADAM BROWN

Comrade, it gives me great pleasure to meet a—

PAGE [*interrupting*]

Kindred spirit.

ADAM BROWN [*continuing*]

—kindred spirit. To know that I have even here a comrade to help to—er——

PAGE

Keep the flag flying.

ADAM BROWN [*continuing*]

—keep the flag flying. It is a well-known fact that in this——

PAGE

Constituency.

ADAM BROWN [*continuing*]

—constituency we have all the elements that go to make up a——

PAGE

Revolution.

ADAM BROWN [*continuing*]

—revolution.

PAGE

I should stand on the seat if I were you.

ADAM BROWN

Thank you. [*He stands on the seat.*] Now I can get going.

MR MURGLE

Where are you going?

ADAM BROWN

I don't know.

PAGE

He is going to save the world.

MR MURGLE

Is he?

ADAM BROWN

Somebody must do it.

L

PAGE

And you think you can save the world by standing on a bench and addressing a non-existent audience?

ADAM BROWN

There is an audience. You are my audience.

MR MURGLE [*almost to himself*]

"Where two or three are gathered together." The man is almost an idealist!

PAGE

Lost in the maze of his own imaginings.

ADAM BROWN

I am about to address the meeting. Will you listen?

PAGE

No.

ADAM BROWN

You must listen. What I say is important. I shall force you to listen. I'm going to save the people!

MR MURGLE

Another dictator!

PAGE

I'm sick of dictators.

ADAM BROWN

I've no intention of being a dictator; but if the people insist on thrusting power into my hands I shall use it.

PAGE

They all begin like that.

ADAM BROWN

If a strong man is needed I tell you I shall do my duty, and if the path of duty is strewn with obstacles I shall ruthlessly overcome them. Too long have you been ruled by the vacillating policies of effete officialdom. Down with the tyrants! I shall lead you to liberty—

PAGE

Equality!

MR MURGLE [*murmuring*]

Fraternity!

ADAM BROWN

That's right, comrades. Trust me. I'm your man. The people need a strong man. They do not know what they need, but I shall point out to them the road they must tread. I shall see that they tread it.

MR MURGLE

Hear, hear!

ADAM BROWN

If some of our comrades prove faint-hearted and afraid of my guidance I shall not hesitate to use force. My power shall break down their feeble resistance. If my path is sprinkled with blood——

PAGE [*interrupting*]

The blood of deluded humanity.

ADAM BROWN

—I shall not hesitate. If they are afraid their fear shall be swallowed up in my fear. We must not go back. I dare not go back, and I fear the future. I have made my choice, and as my power increases, so my fear increases. I must press forward, ever seeking some fresh deed to impress the people. If I consider that force is necessary to compel the people to follow me I shall not shrink from using it.

[*He clears his throat. Pause.*]

PAGE

What about economic stability?

ADAM BROWN

Ah, yes! My friend reminds me. As I attain full political authority, based, perhaps, upon a military foundation, so shall the people attain full economic

stability. Our country shall at last become a—er—a
lane—a land——

PAGE [*interrupting*]

Fit for heroes to live in.

ADAM BROWN

—a land fit for heroes to live in.

MR MURGLE

I've heard that before, I think!

PAGE

You've heard it all before.

ADAM BROWN

Now, my friends, I have put my case clearly before you.
The issue is in your hands. I will leave you now, as I
have another engagement—elsewhere.

*[He steps down from the seat, and MR MURGLE indulges
in a little mild applause.]*

PAGE

You dare not go back! You fear the future! You
cannot go back, and your fear shuts out your future.

MR MURGLE

So sad! So sad!

[The light is dimmer.]

PAGE

The past shuts down with a sound that echoes right
onward into the future. It streams over the hills of the
world, and through the valleys, and enters into the
hearts of men. Black, damnable, insidious! It is fear!
Fear! Why must we surrender? Why must we shut
our eyes and slip shuddering into its dark stream?

ADAM BROWN

I am afraid.

PAGE

I am afraid.

MR MURGLE

I am afraid.

ADAM BROWN

I don't know which way to go.

PAGE

I don't know which way to go.

MR MURGLE

I don't know which way to go.

PAGE

The world has lost its way.

ADAM BROWN

MR MURGLE

The world has lost its way.

PAGE [*shouting*]

It is fear!

ADAM BROWN

Fear!

MR MURGLE

Fear!

[A girl enters from the right. It is JILL. She is plainly and carefully dressed. Her clothes are poor, but she has made the best of them. Her manner is timid.]

MR MURGLE [*always polite*]

How do you do? How are you?

JILL

I'm afraid.

PAGE

The world is afraid.

ADAM BROWN

I will save the world.

PAGE

It's about time you went away.

ADAM BROWN

Where to?

MR MURGLE
Exactly.

PAGE
That is for you to find out.

ADAM BROWN
Of course. I'll soon find a way.
[He goes up to the signpost, hesitates, and commences to exit up-stage, changes his mind, and exits down-stage L.]

MR MURGLE *[to JILL]*
Now, my dear.

JILL
Have you seen John?

MR MURGLE
I don't think so.

JILL
I can't understand it. He said he'd wait for me.

PAGE
It's about time I went again.

JILL
Before you go will you tell me, please, whether you have seen John?

PAGE
John?

JILL
You'd know him in a minute if you saw him. He's tall and rather pale, and his eyes are deep-set and dreamy. He has such a beautiful voice too. I'm sure if he'd spoken to you you would never forget it.

PAGE
Lovers?

JILL
Yes. *[The PAGE shrugs his shoulders.]*

MR MURGLE [*sighing*]
I was in love once.

JILL
I love John. He loves me. We just couldn't live without each other.

PAGE
That's pretty obvious.

JILL
You see we arranged to—to—isn't it silly of me, I can't quite remember. But—anyway, we were to go together—and—he promised to wait for me.

PAGE
I'm not interested. I'm going.
[He goes up to the signpost, and goes off up-stage L.]

MR MURGLE
Sit down, my dear.

JILL
Isn't it getting dark? *[She sits.]*

MR MURGLE
It will be lighter soon.

JILL
You sit down too. *[He does so.]*

MR MURGLE
Were you and John very much in love?

JILL
Why do you say *were*? We *are* very much in love.

MR MURGLE
Have you been parted before?

JILL
No, not since we met. Do you think I shall find him?

MR MURGLE
Of course, my dear, of course.

JILL

I simply must find him. You see, he'll die if we are parted.

MR MURGLE

Don't talk about it.

JILL

How like a man! I must talk about it. Face things! John is just like that. He hates having to face things. That's why I must find him. Although he's quite big and grown up, he's really only a boy.

MR MURGLE

Well, well!

JILL

Do you know, I always have to fold his clothes up for him, and he leaves his ties all over the place. He really is so impractical. He's a poet and a musician.

MR MURGLE

Is he?

JILL

I love to sit in the twilight with John. He says such lovely little poetical things. Sometimes he will play to me. He sits at the piano and improvises. It takes you out of yourself. You forget all the disappointments and sad things—and—oh—it's just like being in heaven!

MR MURGLE [*startled*]

Heaven! In heaven!

JILL

Yes, he's so clever. He just takes you right out of yourself, straight to heaven.

MR MURGLE [*his voice full of longing*]

Straight to heaven!

JILL

I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. We are

strangers! You do meet people like that sometimes, don't you? Take to them at once, just like old friends.

MR MURGLE

Am I like an old friend?

JILL

You are, really! I think you're awfully nice. You help me.

MR MURGLE

I'm so pleased to be able to help you. I must be going in a minute.

JILL

Do you think I might come with you?

MR MURGLE

Please yourself, my dear.

JILL

It is getting dark. Shall we meet John?

MR MURGLE

Is John your—husband? Don't answer me if you'd rather not. I'm an inquisitive old man, aren't I?

JILL

You're not old. Not properly old—like Grandfather! [*Seriously*] John and I are not married really. I mean, not officially. You see, he has such strange and unusual ideas. So have I. We had a marriage service all by ourselves. We said we'd do it just for fun, but we realized it was the loveliest thing we have ever done.

MR MURGLE

Go on, my dear, go on.

JILL

Well, we went to church. St Catharine's, one morning, early. The church was so quiet, and—well—we married ourselves. It was a dull-grey morning, with a gleam of sunshine here and there. We arranged it very carefully;

John went first, and when I arrived just two minutes later he met me at the church door. We walked slowly down the aisle, hand in hand, and went straight to the altar and knelt down together and prayed. Then John said, "Jill, I love you with all my body and soul and want to be with you always." I said, "John, dearest, I love you. Don't ever leave me." We kissed each other in front of the altar, and prayed again for a minute or two. When we opened our eyes the sun had come out and was shining right on the statue of St Catharine. The reflected light from the coloured windows shone on to her face, and I'm sure she understood, and gave us her blessing.

MR MURGLE

A sacrament, my dear, a sacrament.

JILL

We loved it.

MR MURGLE

I'm sure you did. What did you do then?

JILL

Well—er—we did some shopping. Do you think we were wicked?

MR MURGLE

Because you went shopping on your wedding-day?

JILL

No, not that. I mean—about John and me—and the church?

MR MURGLE

Who am I, my dear, that I should pass judgment? Who can tell what is in the heart of man, and how shall we know what is in the heart of God?

JILL

You do say nice things.

MR MURGLE

I must go. I know the way now.

JILL

Shall I come?

MR MURGLE

You must decide.

JILL

Shall we meet John?

MR MURGLE

I don't know.

JILL

I wish I knew what to do. He might be waiting for me somewhere.

MR MURGLE

He may come here.

JILL

Do you think so? Oh, what shall I do?

MR MURGLE

You must decide. [*Pause.*] Good-bye, my dear.
Good-bye. [*He backs away over L.*]

JILL [*going after him impulsively and shaking hands*]

Good-bye, and thank you so much. Promise me that if you see John you will send him to me at once. Tell him I'm waiting—waiting for him. It is getting dark, and I'm so lonely. [*MR MURGLE has gone.*] John, John, why did you leave me? You know we promised to go together. To go together! Oh, John, have you failed me? I trusted you so. [*She sits on the seat well over L.*] You waited for me on the steps of the church, John. [*ST CATHARINE can be seen up-stage L.*] St Catharine's church. I'm sure St Catharine knew all about us. [*ST CATHARINE slowly advances out of the shadows. She is tall, and is dressed in the conventional manner of a church statue.*]

As she stands at the left-hand side of the seat, slightly behind it, she looks exactly like a stone statue.] John! John!
[*entreatingly*].

ST CATHARINE

Why are you crying, child?

JILL [*standing astonished*]

St Catharine! Oh——

[*She slips to the ground on her knees.*]

ST CATHARINE

You needn't be afraid.

JILL

I've lost John. I've been so frightened.

ST CATHARINE

I know all about it.

JILL

I'm not afraid—now. I knew you understood. It's marvellous you being here.

ST CATHARINE

You needed me.

JILL

I must find John. It's so important. We were to go together. To be together always.

ST CATHARINE

You came to my grey old church. I know all about it. I saw you walk back hand in hand down the aisle, out into the world again. You were not afraid then.

JILL

We were together.

ST CATHARINE

You had love in your hearts.

JILL

Now I have lost him. What must I do?

ST CATHARINE

You will find him.

JILL

Oh, thank you! Shall I find him soon? Is he far away?
Which way must I go?

ST CATHARINE

Wait and be patient.

JILL

But I love him so much, and he has been so unhappy.

ST CATHARINE

You will find him.

JILL

You see, we hadn't much money, and——

ST CATHARINE [*interrupting*]

I know all about it, child. The pathetic bravery of love
fighting against poverty and fear.

JILL

We did try to be brave. The world was very cruel to us.

ST CATHARINE

Universal love will lead all men home. Fear is the unforgivable thing. Tyrants rise up and startle the world with their glory. Their pride covers the heavens, and the sound of their trumpets is never ending. They stand on a high mountain and shout aloud and say, "All this is mine—the hills, the little valleys, the rivers, and the fertile plains." They survey the sea and sail upon it in ships. Nothing can diminish their power. They say, "I will make me a god," and out of their vanity they fashion a god in their own image. They worship him and cover the land with temples and compel the people to make sacrifice. Because of the richness of their possessions they are afraid and form a mighty army. They compel the submission of weaker states; but as their power increases so does their fear increase. One day

msc

they die, and their glory is extinguished, a little candle in a great wind.

JILL

I *do* want to find John.

ST CATHARINE

You *will* find him.

JILL

Where must I look? What must I do?

ST CATHARINE

Listen, and you will hear his voice. It may be that countless voices will call you. False voices, that will lead you away from the joy at the end of your journey. Enter into the sanctuary wherein is the altar upon which is burning the steady flame of your love. Listen there, and hear his voice calling. Jill! Jill! Jill!

[JILL does not notice that ST CATHARINE is disappearing.

Other voices take up the word as ST CATHARINE relinquishes it and disappears. Softly at first, but gradually increasing in volume. As the voices grow louder JILL is distracted. She moves about the stage, not knowing whether to follow the voices or not. She comes back to the centre of the stage and kneels, face raised, hands clasped.

JILL *[calling]*

John! John!

[There is utter silence. Then in the distance JOHN's voice is heard calling, "Jill! Jill!"]

JOHN *[entering from the right]*

Jill! Jill! *[He sees her.]* Jill!

JILL

John! Oh, John!

[They embrace.]

JOHN

My darling, where have you been?

JILL

Looking for you, dearest. I've been so frightened.

JOHN

Well, I've looked everywhere for you. We must go together, you know.

JILL

Everything will be all right now. I've been talking to St Catharine. She said I should find you.

JOHN

I say! I like that! I've found you!

JILL

We've found each other.

JOHN

You know, I thought I was lost, but I know the way now.

JILL

Do you?

JOHN

Yes, now we are together.

JILL

You won't ever leave me, John, will you?

JOHN

Never.

JILL

St Catharine said, "Enter into the sanctuary wherein is the altar upon which is burning the steady flame of your love." Our love, John.

JOHN

The steady flame of our love.

JILL

It will lead us home, John.

JOHN

Together.

JILL

Together. I was afraid.

JOHN

I was afraid.

JILL

But I loved you.

JOHN

I love you.

JILL

We are together with love in our hearts.

[They move over left hand in hand.]

JOHN *[pointing off stage L.]*

Over there under the horizon there is a light. It is spreading. See, there is our path!

JILL

Our light, our path, our love!

[They take their path, joyfully, hand in hand.]

CURTAIN

THE WILLING SPIRIT

By ESTHER McCRACKEN

Prize-winning play Whitley Bay Festival 1936

Adjudicator: JOHN BOURNE

This play was broadcast by the B.B.C. in the
North Regional programme.

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SRINAGAR.**

CHARACTERS

EMMA

JACK, *a neighbour*

JO, *Emma's husband*

JINNY, *a neighbour*

*BILL PIGGOTT, *works foreman*

NOTE

CERTAIN phrases in this play are suggestive of the dialect of Tyneside, where the play was originally performed. The author, however, has no objection to the play being spoken in the dialect of any other industrial area. *The Willing Spirit* has been successfully presented in Lancashire, where its performance was awarded the *Amateur Theatre* trophy.

Applications regarding performances of this play should be addressed to Play Rights and Publications, Ltd., Maltravers House, Arundel Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or The Baker International Play Bureau, 178 Tremont Street, Boston, U.S.A.

THE WILLING SPIRIT

SCENE I

We are in the back bed-sitting-room on the ground floor of a tenement house. It is a dark, damp little room, containing very little furniture. An old bedstead stands in one corner, a single blanket covering the pillow, and odd 'pieces' that serve for bedclothes. There is a table in the centre of the room, and two chairs, one behind the table and the other L. of it. Near the fire stands an old wicker chair with arms—or the remains of arms.

In the centre of the L. wall a door opens on to the passage that leads to the street; down R. there is a fireplace with a kettle standing in the hearth. In the centre of the back wall is the window, which looks out on to a brick wall, as high or higher than the window, and standing about five feet away from it. A clean curtain hangs in the lower half of the window, as it does in so many others, which gives a false idea of prosperity from the outside.

EMMA, a woman of about twenty-five, is sitting in the wicker chair in front of the fire, nursing her baby and waiting for her husband to come in. A box which serves as a cot for the baby stands on the floor by the window. There is a cupboard R. of the window, and on a hook on the door of it EMMA'S coat is hanging. EMMA is humming a rather sad little tune to the baby as the curtain rises.

Footsteps are heard coming along the passage. EMMA raises her head and listens. A knock comes at the door of the room, which opens before she has time to reply, and a man's head comes round it. As the door opens EMMA stops singing.

JACK [*a neighbour, a man of about thirty*]
Jo not back yet?

EMMA

He's not back yet, but he cannot be long now. Come in and wait for him if you like.

JACK

I think I will. It's cold outside. [*He shuts the door and comes C., putting his cap on the table.*] How's the little lad to-day? Putting on weight yet?

EMMA

Off and on. He gained a bit a fortnight past, but when he was weighed yesterday he'd lost again.

JACK

What do they think's keepin' him back?

EMMA

The nurse at the Welfare says there's nothing wrong that you could put your finger on. She thinks he'll start picking up soon.

JACK

It's the weather, like as not. It gets you down when you've lived in the district all your life. You cannot blame a bit bairn for takin' a while to get used to it.

EMMA

He's been fretful to-day, but he seems to be off properly now. I'll try him in his box again for a bit. Whisht, now! [*She rises and carries the baby up to the window beside the box.*] Every sunny afternoon there's a patch of sunlight comes in here for about a quarter of an hour—when it gets round that house opposite, and before it drops behind the wall there. I always try to have his box in it. It was there to-day for the first time for a week, but he wouldn't lie, so it was wasted. [*To JACK*] Give me a hand down with this box, will you?

JACK [*picking it up*]
Where d'you want it?

EMMA

Just by the fire there. [*He moves the box.*] Thanks.
Will you not sit down?

[*She is tucking the baby into the box.*]

JACK

I think I'll warm me legs a bit first. [*Pause.*] I hear tell that this block of buildings is to go. They're pulling them down under this new Slum Clearance Scheme.

EMMA

That'd be good news if it was true; only—where'd we go? It's that difficult to find places nowadays.

JACK

They say they're puttin' up grand little new houses on the Hill there for the folks they're turning out. There'll be sunshine there, if it's anywhere.

EMMA

They may be putting them up, but who's going to live in them? Not the likes of us. It's all we can do to keep one room going, never mind a house. Mind your cap, will you? [*Hands it to him.*] I'll have to get the tea set. [*JACK stuffs his cap into his pocket, and EMMA turns up to the cupboard. She stands there, with the cupboard door open, looking out through the window.*] I know the place you mean well enough. [*Coming to the table with cups*] Jo and me used to take a tram out there in our courting days and have a walk across it now and again.

[*Sets out the cups.*]

JACK

Mind, it'll be grand out there—very different from this hole.

EMMA

Maybe. But to my mind you'll not clear the slums until

folk has money to live different, and work to feel different.
[Up to cupboard for the plates.]

JACK *[sighing]*

And dear knows when that'll be! *[Pause.]* I see your ceiling's as bad as ever.

EMMA

Yes. Lucky there's only that queer body upstairs, or it'd have been down long ago. There's one thing: if it does come down it cannot spoil the beauty of this place. There's eight rooms in this house, and this is the only one that hasn't slats showing. We've a lot to be thankful for.
[To the cupboard for a tin of milk.]

JACK

They say the rents for the new houses'll be pretty reasonable.

EMMA

I dare say; but if we could manage the rent we haven't the stuff for more than one room. It all went months ago. What's more, from up there it means a bus-fare to look for work. They don't seem to think of that.

JACK

You're about right.

[The outer door shuts, and steps come quickly along the passage. EMMA moves up to the cupboard for the teapot.]

EMMA

This'll be Jo.

JO *[calling off]*

Emma! *[The door bursts open, and he stands on the threshold.]* Emma—hullo, Jack, lad!—Emma, I've got a job!
[Silence.]

EMMA *[turning, teapot in hand, at the cupboard]*

You've what?

JO [*coming to L. of the table and leaning on it, excitedly*]
I've got a job. It's honest-to-God!

EMMA [*vacantly, coming down a step or two*]
You've got a job!

JO [*leaping round the table and seizing her by the shoulders*]
Come on, wake up, woman! It's true as I'm standing here. Cannot you say you're glad or something? You look as if you thought I was a ghost. [*He gives her a hug and a smacking kiss.*] There, perhaps that'll help you to realize that I'm flesh and blood.

EMMA [*her voice trembling slightly*]
Oh, Jo, you're not being funny? You mean it, don't you? Don't you?

JO
Why, of course I do! Here, sit down and pull yourself together. [*He helps her into the wicker chair.*]

JACK
Jo, you blighter, what happened? How did you hear of it, and where is it?

EMMA
When do you start? Tell us about it.

JO [*laughing excitedly as he walks up to the window and down again, flinging his arms above his head*]
I can hardly believe it myself yet.

JACK
I don't blame you. It's weeks since I even heard of any-one gettin' a job. Come on, let's hear how it's done.

JO [*up L. of the table*]
You know Bill Piggott?

JACK
Him that's foreman at Ellingsworth's?

JO
Yes, that's him. Well, I was standing at the street corner

when he came along. He stopped beside me and said, "D'you want a job, Jo?" "Oh, no," I said, "I'm that busy I don't know how I'm going to fit everything in." "Ellingsworth's wanting a man," he says. "If you're quick maybe you'll get it." "You're not kidding?" I said, just as you did, Emma. "I'm not likely to kid you about a thing like that," he says, and before he'd finished speaking I was half-way down the street. "Ask for Tom Briggs," he shouted after me. When I got to Ellingsworth's I asked for Tom Briggs, and—well—I GOT THE JOB! [*Again he laughs his excited laugh.*] It was as easy as that, after all these months.

[*Sits in the chair L. of the table.*]

EMMA

Oh, Jo, I used to dream something like this . . . but I'd lost heart even for that lately.

JO

I know. You used to look at me every time I came in, till I was fair scared to open the door and face those eyes of yours. And then, when you weren't lookin' for it any more, I came in with the good news—and you didn't believe me.

EMMA [*eagerly*]

Never mind. I believe you now. What like of a job is it?

JACK

Yes, come on. Let's hear what you do when you work.

JO

Well, it's not much of a job, of course; but you never know what it might lead to. It's just working the lever for one of the machines at the moment. I start to-morrow. I'll be able to tell you more about it then.

JACK

So our Jo's one of the world's workers again! [*JO laughs*]

and EMMA smiles.] Well [*pulling his cap out of his pocket*], don't forget your friends when you rise in the world. And don't forget me neither if you hear tell of them wanting any more men.

JO

You bet I wouldn't!

EMMA

Maybe everything's looking up, Jack. It'll be your turn next.

JACK

Aye, maybe. Well, I'm off. [*He crosses to C., where JO rises to meet him.*] And, Jo, when you've got your nose to the grindstone to-morrow think of me [*crossing to door*]*—a gentleman of leisure having a walk round the park. Good-bye, Emma. So long, Jo. I'll look in again to-morrow night just to see how you got on.*

JO

So long, Jack. See you to-morrow night, then. [*Coming L. of the table after shutting the door behind JACK*] Oh, Emma, I'm that excited! Just think of it—clockin' in, clockin' out, and PAY-DAYS again! Have I a suit of overalls left fit to wear? Will they be in the cupboard?

[He rushes to the cupboard and starts pulling things out.]

EMMA [*moving the kettle and stirring the fire beneath it*]

Of course you have! It's about the only thing you have got left; but I kept them. They nearly went once or twice; but never quite. [*Turning and seeing the mess he's making*] Here, leave the cupboard alone, man. I'll find them for you. [*To cupboard*] Dear me, you've got everything all over the place. There, now, there you are. Here, take them—quick. I must make the tea.

[Slow black-out. EMMA is singing happily as the curtain falls slowly.]

SCENE II

The next afternoon. Fade up lights after rise of curtain.

EMMA [*at window*]

As soon as the sun gets round I put his box there. I don't know that it does any good really, but he gets that little. It's the best I can do.

JINNY [*a neighbour, a good deal older than EMMA*]

You should get along to the park with him.

EMMA

I do sometimes, but it's so cold just now. In the summer I'll have to try, but—oh, Jinny, maybe we'll be out of here by then.

JINNY

You likely will. Maybe we will too, but where we'll be I wouldn't like to guess.

EMMA

I was talking to Jack Spencer yesterday. [*Coming C. and sitting; JINNY in wicker chair knitting.*] He was saying that they're building grand little houses up on the Hill there for the folks that'd be turned out of here.

JINNY

Our Tom'd never go up there. Think what it would cost him to come down here to sign on.

EMMA

Yes, that's what I said.

JINNY

Anyway, when you've lived in one room as long as we have you wouldn't know what to do with a house.

EMMA

I'd know what to do with it all right, if I could furnish it; but we'd look soft with a bed in one room and a couple of chairs in another. [*They both laugh.*] You

know, Jinny, I used to have me heart set on a house with a bit of garden. We had one at home before I came into the town to live. I would like fine to have a bit of garden.

JINNY

You'd have one with one of those new houses we were talking about, I hear tell.

EMMA

I know . . . but I'm talking daft. We'll have to stop here for a while, at any rate, until we've managed to save a bit. The rent-book's clear. That's one thing we've always seen to. You have to have a roof over your head. I remember we had to pawn the bedclothes once to pay it. Just before Mary died there was that many things we had to get.

JINNY

That was very nearly a year ago, wasn't it?

EMMA [*slowly*]

A year ago on the twenty-sixth of next month. You know, Mary was always delicate. She'd have had a bad time struggling through the pinching and scraping of this last year, with Jo out of benefit . . . but—two years old! It's a bonny age.

JINNY

Ay, I know, hinny. But maybe this one'll have a better chance.

EMMA

He should have if Jo's job's permanent, as he seems to think it will be. Oh, Jinny, lass, you should have seen him! It would have done your heart good. He was a man again, just like what he used to be when I first met him. He'd been so depressed lately it seemed that nothing could raise his spirits. He was pleased when Jo came, of course—excited about having a son, but

it didn't last. And then when he found that little Jo wasn't really strong it seemed to make him worse than ever.

JINNY [*rising and going to the box to look at the baby*]

But the bairn's stronger than he was, isn't he? I think he looks better meself. Poor bit things, they do have a struggle of it, don't they?

EMMA [*joining her*]

Yes, they do. It doesn't seem fair, does it? The nurse at the Welfare says he's pickin' up. I thought maybe it was my fault that he wasn't getting food that suited him, but she says it isn't that.

JINNY [*down R. to the fireplace*]

Don't fret yourself. Get him away into a new house that's not so dark and damp, and watch him thrive. That's what you've got to think about.

EMMA

I'll do that all right. But it's funny, you know, Jinny [*coming down C.*]*—all day I've been thinking about getting out of this room, and somehow—I've never liked it so much. [Sits at back of the table.]* It seems quite friendly now that I know I'll be gone soon. All sorts of things have happened here, things I'll not easy forget—Mary dying, and little Jo being born, and, oh, countless other small things.

JINNY [*practically*]

Take a look round you with your eyes properly open, woman. Look at that patch of damp over by the window there. If your Jo has patched it once with fresh paper he's done it a hundred times—hasn't he now?

EMMA

Yes, he has. It's a leaky down-runner outside that does

it. Jo couldn't mend that, though he tried when he found that nothing was going to be done about it.

JINNY

And what about the bugs? Have you got rid of them yet?

EMMA

No, we haven't. Leastways, not properly. They still come out every now and again.

JINNY

Then stop talking daft and get yourselves out just as soon as it's possible.

EMMA

You're right. I know that well enough. [*Rising*] The kettle's boiling. A cup of tea by way of celebration'll not come amiss. [*Up to the cupboard for the cups.*]

JINNY [*pushing the chair R. up to the table. She collects the milk, etc., from the cupboard while EMMA puts the tea in the pot and fills it*]

That it won't. It's a long time since we had anything to celebrate in this street, but whether we have or we haven't a cup of tea's never come amiss. [*Sitting R. of the table*] Eh, Emma, what'd we do without tea?

EMMA [*filling the teapot*]

I don't know. We seem to have lived on it for the last few months. [*Round the table to the back; she pours out.*] It's precious seldom we see meat, anyway.

JINNY

Meat may build up your body, but it doesn't fill your stomach—leastways, not the amount we can buy—and it's empty stomachs that cause the mischief. [*Slowly*] It's an awful thing to be hungry, and, mind you—I know.

EMMA [*sitting*]

So we stuff ourselves up with bread and potatoes and get along somehow. I like me talking! You've got four bairns all needing clothes as well as food. I've only got one. [*Drinks.*]

JINNY

Aye, but mine are strong bairns. They could stand a bonny sight more hardship than yours could, and that makes all the difference. [*Drinks.*]

EMMA

I wouldn't like to have four all as ailing as this one. But he won't ail when we live up on the Hill there. [*Eagerly*] Oh, Jinny, I saw a pram in that furniture shop down on the main street. You know the place I mean—I cannot remember what they call it—where all the stuff stands out on the pavement.

JINNY

I know where you mean—Simpson's.

EMMA

That's it. Of course, it wasn't new. I think I'll just go in and ask the price as I'm passing. I'd dearly like to have a pram for him; then I could put him outside. I'd maybe get along to the park with him a bit oftener. It's a long way to carry him when he gets bigger. [*Drinks.*]

JINNY

Well, it can't do any harm asking the price. I'll come with you when you go. Simpson's an old twister, and what he asks is not what he expects to get. He'd as like as not take the heart out of you straight away, you're that timid. [*Drinks.*]

EMMA

I'll have to be going out now to get something for Jo's tea. He'll need more than bread and tea now that he's

a working man again. The shop'll just have to give us a bit of 'tick.' [Drinks.]

JINNY

They'll do that all right when they know Jo's working. I'll come down with you, and we'll price the pram as we go [*finishing the tea in her cup*].

EMMA [*laughing happily*]

I hoped you'd say that, Jinny. Mind, you're not half a quick worker. You know, I'll maybe not get the pram for dear knows how long yet.

JINNY

Never mind; we can ask the price. [*Pushing back her chair and rising*] He might let you have it on the hire-purchase. Would Jo let you get it that way?

EMMA

He might if he knew his money was coming in regular.

JINNY [*crossing to the door*]

I'll just slip along and get me coat. I'll be back in half a jiffy. [*Exit, closing the door.*]

[*EMMA puts the cups together and carries them to the wooden box which stands R. of the cupboard with a chipped enamel basin on it. She takes her coat from the hook and puts it on, singing happily. She lifts the baby from his box and carries him to the wicker chair, where she sits down with him.*]

EMMA [*as she picks him out of the box*]

Come on, now, baby Jo. You funny little bit thing! You don't know it, but your whole world's changed in the last twenty-four hours. [*She sings again as she wraps the baby in his shawl.*] There, now, you're all tucked up warm and cosy. Wait till you're lording it down the street in your own carriage. In another year you'll be digging in the garden, pulling the flowers. Here, come on; your mother's thoughts are running away with her.

[*She rises and feels in the pocket of her coat.*] Now . . . me purse . . . oh, and me key.

[*She searches on the mantelpiece. As she does so the door opens, and JO comes in.*]

EMMA [*without turning round*]

I'm just ready, Jinny. [*She turns and sees JO.*] Why, Jo! You're back early.

[*JO shuts the door behind him and stands there, staring at her unseeingly without replying.*]

EMMA [*desperately*]

What is it, Jo? What's happened? [*Then, as he still doesn't answer, she says dully:*] So they didn't start you, after all?

JO [*sinking on to the chair L. of the table*]

I started all right. Oh, Emma——

[*He buries his face in his hands.*]

EMMA

Wait till I put the bairn down. [*She puts him in his box again.*] Lie still, now, honey. [*Coming C.*] There, now, go on, Jo—tell us.

JO [*raising his head*]

I cannot understand it. I don't rightly know yet what happened. They told me I'd fainted. I've never fainted before. "Not fit," the foreman said, and when I was in the nurse's room I heard the doctor say something about "under-nourished," or I thought I did.

EMMA

I don't know what you're talking about, Jo. Begin at the start and tell us what happened.

JO [*sitting up and trying to pull himself together*]

I'm sorry, Emma. I still feel a bit muzzy. Well, I started work at half-past eight. They were a decent lot—the men, I mean—and I thought to meself that I was going to like being there. I managed the work all right;

at least, I thought I did. I remember thinking the lever was getting a bit heavier. That was about a quarter to twelve, just before we knocked off. And—the next thing I knew I was lying on a couch in the nurse's room. I'd fainted—at least, they said I had—and I suppose I must have done, for I cannot remember how I got there. [*Silence. All through this speech JO sounds puzzled and vague, as if he were trying to work out something he cannot understand.*] I'm sorry, Emma. I'm a failure.

[*He drops his head into his hands again.*]

EMMA [*in the old toneless voice*]

It's not your fault. The doctor was right. You've not had a decent meal—not what you call decent—for months.

JO [*brokenly*]

Just think of it! I cannot pull a ruddy lever backwards and forwards for half a day. A lot of use it'll be looking for work after this.

EMMA [*staring straight before her and almost whispering*]

A pram . . . and a house with a bit of garden.

JO [*raising his head and looking at her*]

What d'you say, Emma? Don't go out. Take your coat off and stop here with us for a bit, anyway.

EMMA [*unfastening her coat, still staring straight ahead*]

It's all right. I'm not going out. I've been a long way this afternoon. [*She gives a little bitter laugh that is half a sob.*] But I'm back now. [*Her voice changes to an attempt at brusqueness.*] I'll put the kettle on to warm that tea up a bit. It's cold. [*She puts the kettle on the fire as she speaks, then goes to the cupboard to hang up her coat. She stands for a moment looking out of the window.*] It's funny . . . the sun's shining.

[*The outer door shuts, and quick steps come along the passage. Some one knocks at the door of the room.*]

N

JO [*urgently*]

Whoever that is, Emma, you're not to let them in. If it's Jack I don't want to see him. Emma! [*Rises.*]

EMMA [*crossing to the door, touching his shoulder on the way*]
Whisht! It'll be Jinny, that's all. I was expecting her. Sit down, man. I'll not let her in.

PIGGOTT [*off, as EMMA opens the door*]
Is Jo in?

EMMA [*in a whisper, as she holds the door shut again*]
It's Bill Piggott.

JO [*rising to the fireplace*]
I don't want to see him.

PIGGOTT [*shouting off*]
Open the door!

EMMA [*opening the door again, but keeping PIGGOTT out*]
Jo's in, but he doesn't want to see anyone.

PIGGOTT
He's going to see me.

EMMA [*her voice hard*]
You know what happened, I suppose? It's no good seeing him.

PIGGOTT
Get out of my way, woman, and leave this to me. [*There is a pause. PIGGOTT comes in, but JO is leaning on the mantelpiece without looking at him. EMMA closes the door softly and leans against it. PIGGOTT moves up C. a step and speaks.*] Hello, Jo!

JO [*turning to him*]
Hello, Bill! [*Suddenly wild and vehement*] What have you come for? To see an interesting case, eh? Or to have a good laugh, or maybe to curse? After all, you got us the job. It was a grand choice you made. Don't you know a ruin when you see one? Well, blast you, I

don't care what you've come for—you can get out.
D'you hear? GET OUT!

PIGGOTT [*his voice hard*]

Go on, work yourself up. I suppose you've been sitting here ever since you came in, feeling sorry for yourself, and thinking yourself a sort of bloomin' martyr? [*His voice changes.*] You damn fool, Jo! Why didn't you come to see me before you came home?

JO [*sullenly*]

What good would that have done?

PIGGOTT

It might have eased your mind a bit. Do you really think you're the only one that's done what you did to-day? Did you expect to find your muscles in order and everything working properly when you haven't worked for—how long is it?—over three years? And, mind you, you weren't half going at it, neither. Why, man, I saw you myself. You were pulling that lever with all the strength you possessed, as if your life depended on seeing how hard you could do it.

JO

It did depend on me doing it. Bill, I know you tried to do me a good turn when you suggested this job, and I'm sorry I let you down, but I wish to God you'd go now! It's little comfort to know that others have done the same as me. I cannot stop thinking that I've had a job and lost it. I've had a job and lost it—had a job and lost it! . . . [*Turning to the fire again, his hands to his head*] It goes on and on, drumming in me brain.

EMMA [*crossing to behind the table*]

You'd best leave him alone, Bill.

PIGGOTT

Oh, so you've lost it, have you? Then, what d'you think I'm here for? [*Silence. They both look at him.*]

EMMA [*tremulously, moving a step forward*]
Bill Piggott!

JO
What d'you mean, Bill? I have lost it, haven't I?
Haven't I?

PIGGOTT
That depends upon what *you* mean. I don't say you haven't lost—temporarily, anyway—the job you were doing to-day, but—you've to report for light duty to-morrow.

EMMA [*very near to tears, but fighting with them*]
If you're scoffing him, Bill Piggott, I'll kill you for it.
I mean it. I'll kill you! [*She can't go on.*]

PIGGOTT
Now, listen here, the pair of you. You've both got yourselves worked up over something that's nowhere near as bad as you're making it out to be. I'm serious enough, Emma; you might know that.

JO
What d'you mean by 'light duty,' Bill?

EMMA
You mean—I suppose—you mean—it'll be less money?

PIGGOTT
Yes, I'm afraid so, at first. You'll need to go carefully, Jo, for the next few days. Them muscles I was talking about'll take time to harden. And here's a bit of advice for you if—*when* you do get this job again. Them levers are all a question of knack, not strength. Remember that next time.

JO
How much do I lose—off me wages, I mean? How much will I be getting now?

PIGGOTT

I can't say for certain, but whatever it is, you can take it from me it'll be better than parish relief.

EMMA

You're right, it will. Oh, it's not the money I'm thinking of so much as what's behind it.

JO [*sitting R. of the table*]

I don't know—it takes the heart out of you.

EMMA

Jo, you mustn't talk like that. Think of it, man—you're still working, and as long as you're working there's something to hope for, something to look forward to.

PIGGOTT

Why, of course there is!

EMMA

And what was there on relief? Nothing. Just trying to get through the days as best you could to the end of your life. [*She shudders.*] But that's over. Oh, Bill, I'll see he gets proper food from now on. I'll see to it somehow. I'll get him right again.

PIGGOTT

That's the girl! Why, man, in a week or two you won't know yourself! A bit more money coming in, regular work and meals, and you'll be as right as a trivet.

JO [*vaguely*]

I dare say. I don't know that I can understand it properly yet.

EMMA [*her face lighting up*]

But I can. Only we've been up and down so often in the last twenty-four hours, it's no wonder he's mazed. Here, the kettle'll be boiling in a minute, and we'll have some tea. Will you stop, Bill?

PIGGOTT [*putting his cap L. of the table*]

I don't mind if I do.

JINNY [*calling off*]

Are you coming, Emma?

EMMA [*at the cupboard*]

No! [*She stops suddenly, then laughs, and her voice is happy.*] Yes, I am—I'm coming. [*After all, pricing the pram will do no harm. Then excitedly to JO and BILL*] Here, Bill, sit down; have a cup of tea and a talk to him. It'll do him good. Put some water in the pot when it boils, Jo. [*Putting on her coat*] I'm going out after all, but Bill'll keep you company, and I'll not be long. [*At window*] Coming, Jinny! Give a look to the bairn, Jo, will you? I'll not be above half an hour. Yes, Jinny, I'm coming! [*She opens the door and exits. She can be heard running down the passage, and there is a triumphant note in her voice.*] I'm coming! I'm coming!

[*On EMMA'S exit BILL pushes an open packet of cigarettes across the table into JO'S line of vision. JO raises his head and looks at BILL. Slowly he smiles, and takes a cigarette as the*

CURTAIN FALLS

TWENTIETH-CENTURY LULLABY

By CEDRIC MOUNT

This play had more performances than any other in the British Drama League Community Theatre Festival 1936, and reached the final at the Old Vic, London.

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Cedric Mount*

All the impressions
that I have got from
these dramas are based
on the student's
is worth reading for the
experience a good knowledge
of the subject.

CHARACTERS

MARY SMITH

THE SCHOOLMASTER

THE CLERGYMAN

THE ANNOUNCER

THE BUSINESS MAN

THE BRIDE

THE POLITICIAN

THE MADONNA

Applications regarding performances of this play should be addressed to Play Rights and Publications, Ltd., Maltravers House, Arundel Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or The Baker International Play Bureau, 178 Tremont Street, Boston, U.S.A.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY LULLABY

SCENE: *A nursery. MARY SMITH is sitting by the fireside in the nursery, gently rocking to and fro the cradle in which her baby is lying. As she rocks she sings a lullaby. The lamps have not been lit, and the only light comes from the fire, which throws a warm glow on MARY and the cradle, and casts strange leaping shadows over the rest of the room.*

MARY [*singing*]

Hush-a-bye, baby, on the tree-top.

When the wind blows the cradle will rock.

When the bough breaks the cradle will fall.

Down will come baby, cradle, and all.

[*She peeps at the baby for a moment, and then goes on singing, more softly:*

Hush-a-bye, baby, on the tree-top.

When the wind blows the cradle will rock.

When the bough——

[*She peeps again, and, satisfied that the baby is asleep, stops singing. But she does not take her eyes off the child, nor get up from her stool by the cradle. And presently she begins to talk to the sleeping infant, as mothers will.*

MARY

There's my precious! [*She tucks him up.*] Sleep well! And soon you'll grow up into a fine, big boy, won't you, my darling? And every one will say, "Look at Peter Ulric Smith—isn't he the bonniest boy you ever saw?" And then you'll go to school, and the master

will teach you all sorts of clever things. And you'll learn them all so quickly! "Peter Ulric Smith," he'll say, "you've got a brain in a million. If all my pupils were as easy to teach as you are my job would be a pleasure," he'll say.

[At this moment another voice—a man's—starts speaking from the other side of the room, and in a patch of light among the shadows we see the SCHOOLMASTER standing, dressed in mortar-board and black gown. He seems to be talking to some one we cannot see, and MARY takes not the slightest notice of him, but goes on whispering to her baby. The only difference is that now we cannot hear her, because of the SCHOOLMASTER'S loud and rather sarcastic voice.]

SCHOOLMASTER

Peter Ulric Smith! There's a name to give a boy! Did you ever hear anything like it?

[He pauses for a second, with a rather sneering smile on his face, and in that second we hear MARY saying to the baby:]

MARY

It's a very nice name, really—but you needn't tell the other boys what the *U* stands for if you don't want them to know.

SCHOOLMASTER

I could forgive the name if you had brains, but really you seem to be even more woolly-witted than most boys of your age—and that's saying a great deal! God knows why I spend my life teaching you and a hundred other brats like you, when I might have been doing something really useful—sweeping the streets or coal-mining, for instance! How I'm going to cram enough knowledge into your brain-box to get you through your beastly little examinations I can't imagine.

MARY [*still talking to her baby*]

And my clever son's going to pass all his examinations—right at the top of the list—isn't he? Eh?

SCHOOLMASTER

Still, don't let us exaggerate the importance of examinations. The most important thing you've got to learn, Peter *Ulric* Smith, is that learning doesn't really matter a damn. Any cad can learn the sort of thing you find in books. What we want is a race of young men who can play games for the honour of the old school—and cheat and lie a little when called upon to do so.

MARY

Of course, I want you to take an interest in sport too, but you will remember that lessons are more important, won't you, my precious? And do be careful not to hurt yourself playing any nasty rough games.

SCHOOLMASTER

Those are the most important things, of course, but I expect your beastly parents will fret if I don't teach you a whole lot of unnecessary things into the bargain, so you'd better learn a spot of Latin as well. Eh? I'm damned if I really know why—except that we always have taught a spot of Latin. And, anyway, we've got all the text-books now, and we can't waste 'em.

MARY

And then you must learn French—and German—and Spanish. Then when you grow up you can be a diplomat, or an ambassador, or something important like that.

SCHOOLMASTER

Who wants to learn French and German? Now you listen to me. My father went round the world three times, and he never knew a word of French and German

—nor Spanish, for that matter. “If English is good enough for me,” he used to say, “it’s good enough for these damned foreigners. Why should I take the trouble to learn their damned language? It’d only give them an exaggerated idea of their importance.” That’s what he used to say—and he was right! Now, then—*amo, amas, amat*——

MARY

Or perhaps you’d rather go into the Church? That would be nice too. Then I could go to service and listen to you preaching. You know, Peter, I think I’d like that best of all. And then you could christen all the little babies—just like that nice clergyman with the white hair christened you.

[As MARY goes on talking to her baby we see the nice CLERGYMAN with the white hair. He is standing at the other side of the room, quite near the SCHOOLMASTER, and his face is lit up by the dancing light from the fireplace, as he intones:]

CLERGYMAN

I baptize you Peter Ulric, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

[He makes a gesture with his hand, as though baptizing an invisible baby.]

MARY

That would be nice, but I won’t influence you or persuade you—I promise I won’t. My baby shall choose just what he wants to do for himself, shan’t he, my precious?

[As MARY says this another man’s voice—a caressing, musical, condescending voice—begins to speak from the shadows, and then a flicker of light shows us that it is an ANNOUNCER in evening dress, speaking into a microphone.]

ANNOUNCER

Juvenile unemployment, says the Savant Committee Report, issued to-day, has reached so serious a pitch that vocational training and selection can no longer safely be left to the individual or the parent. The Committee recommends that a board of psycho-analysts and efficiency experts should be set up to examine all children of pre-employable age and determine on the career for which they are best fitted. The report further suggests that the surplus or non-employable juvenile population should be drafted into Government instructional centres, to be trained in the art of employing enforced leisure.

MARY

Of course, they do say it's hard for boys to get jobs nowadays when they leave school; but it won't be hard for my Ulric, will it, my sweet? You'll always be able to find a nice job.

ANNOUNCER

Here are the latest unemployment figures. The total number of persons unemployed at twelve noon to-day was three millions four hundred and twenty-seven thousand six hundred and one, an increase of one on the previous day's figures.

MARY

And, oh, my darling, when you do grow up and go out into the world there are two things I want you always to remember.

CLERGYMAN

Put your trust in God, and love thy neighbour as thyself.

SCHOOLMASTER

Never take anything or anybody on trust. Look after Number One, and do the other fellow down if necessary.

MARY

And, whatever you do, always be honest and honourable—and never tell a lie.

[On these words we hear another voice, a thick, rasping, bullying voice. And then we see the BUSINESS MAN to whom it belongs—a plump, florid creature, flashily dressed and smoking a fat cigar.]

BUSINESS MAN

Now, look here, Smith, you've been with us for over a year, and I don't deny you've done pretty well. You're intelligent, and you've got a certain talent for organization, but that's not enough. I'm not in business for my health, and I want some one who can show results. Now, take our advertising. It's all right—artistic and all that—but it's got no punch. And it don't make our products look worth enough, if you get what I mean.

MARY

My Peter would never tell a lie, would he? Promise me that.

BUSINESS MAN

Not strictly true? Well, what of it? What's that got to do with it? People don't expect advertising to be true. And here's another thing. I've been going over the books, and I find you've been allowing far too much latitude to debtors. That's got to stop, too. Then there's that little matter of the diffused delivery agreements.

MARY

"Honesty is the best policy." That's the motto I want my big son to have.

BUSINESS MAN

What? Sharp practice? Now, look here, Smith, you're not a child tied to your mother's apron-strings any longer. It may be sharp practice—I'm not denying it,

though if you'd been some one outside the firm I'd have sued you for saying so—but sharp practice is what put me where I am to-day. And if sharp practice is necessary to keep me there, then sharp practice there's going to be, whether you like it or not.

ANNOUNCER

Here are the latest unemployment figures.

BUSINESS MAN

I may not be as well educated as you are, but I've yet to discover that honesty is the best policy—except for those who are looking for the bankruptcy court.

ANNOUNCER

The total number of persons unemployed at twelve noon to-day was three millions four hundred and twenty-seven thousand——

BUSINESS MAN

Now, look here, Smith, you're a good boy. You'll go far if you look at things my way. But I'm just putting you wise. It's got to be my way or out! Get me?

ANNOUNCER

—six hundred and two, an increase of two on the previous day's figures.

MARY

Then you'll be getting married and leaving your poor old mother. Oh, yes, you will! I know! But I don't mind really. Well, I suppose I do in a way, but I'll try not to, for your sake. Especially if she's nice. Oh, my precious one, you will be careful to pick the right girl, won't you? Then we'll have a lovely wedding, with the bride all in white satin and orange blossom and——

[She goes on talking, but our attention is diverted by the CLERGYMAN. He is reading the wedding service to the BRIDE, who is kneeling in front of him,

all in white satin and orange blossom, as MARY imagined her. We cannot see any bridegroom.

CLERGYMAN

Repeat after me. I, Judith——

BRIDE

I, Judith——

CLERGYMAN

Take thee, Peter Ulric——

BRIDE

Take thee, Peter Ulric——

CLERGYMAN

To my wedded husband——

BRIDE

To my wedded husband——

CLERGYMAN

To have and to hold from this day forward——

BRIDE

To have and to hold from this day forward——

CLERGYMAN

For better, for worse——

BRIDE

For better, for worse——

CLERGYMAN

For richer, for poorer——

BRIDE

For richer, for poorer——

CLERGYMAN

In sickness and in health——

BRIDE

In sickness and in health——

CLERGYMAN

To love, cherish, and to obey——

BRIDE

To love, cherish, and to obey——

CLERGYMAN

Till death us do part——

BRIDE

Till death us do part.

ANNOUNCER

The number of marriages solemnized in churches during the past six months has declined by forty per cent., states a report.

CLERGYMAN

Judith and Peter, you have just taken the most solemn vows a man and a woman can take. You have sworn in God's house to love and cherish one another till death parts you. I hope you realize sincerely the true significance of that vow, and that you will fulfil it, come what may.

ANNOUNCER

On the other hand, the report records that the total number of divorces granted during the same period was more than sixty-five per cent. above the figure for the previous six months.

[During the last six or seven speeches MARY has been humming Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" as she rocks the cradle gently to and fro. Now she breaks off and speaks to the sleeping baby.]

MARY

Then you must be very kind to her—but you must try to be firm too. Remember, a man must always be a hero to his wife.

[The BRIDE has taken off her veil and orange blossom, and now she bursts into a tirade of abuse.]

BRIDE

A hero! My God! A fine hero you'd make! Why on

O

earth I was fool enough to tie myself up to you for life I can't imagine. Look at the Robinsons—they've got a car. Look at the Browns—they've got a radiogram. Look at the Joneses—he takes his wife to Brighton every week-end.

ANNOUNCER

The report records that the total number of divorces granted during the same period——

BRIDE

Of course it isn't your fault! Nothing's ever your fault. As a matter of fact, that's probably true. It's the fault of the way you were brought up. You're too namby-pamby. You won't do anything I ask because you say it's unethical. And what's the result? I have to go about looking like a scarecrow, while Mrs Robinson has new furs, and Mrs Brown has a chinchilla coat, and Mrs Jones has——

ANNOUNCER

More than sixty-five per cent. above the figure for the previous six months.

BRIDE

All right, all right! I admit I was with him. I've been with him lots of times. And can you blame me? He's sensible. He knows which side his bread is buttered. He's got a car, and a yacht, and a bungalow by the river. He can afford to buy me a chinchilla wrap. Of course I was with him! Well, what are you going to do about it?

CLERGYMAN

To love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part.

BRIDE [*in a wheedling voice*]

Of course I want a divorce! But you wouldn't want to divorce *me*, would you? You'll be nice and give me evidence, so that I can divorce you, won't you? All the ✓

best people do it that way. You wouldn't refuse me this one thing, would you?

MARY

And you'll never tell a lie, will you, my precious?

BRIDE

Besides, if you divorce me they won't let me marry Tony in a church—and I do so want a nice church wedding, with lilies and orange blossom and bridesmaids. You will do it for me, won't you? It's the last thing I'll ever ask of you.

ANNOUNCER

In the High Court of Justice, Probate, Divorce, and Admiralty Division, Mr Justice Jackson to-day made absolute the following decrees *nisi*—Robinson *v.* Robinson; Jones *v.* Jones; Brown *v.* Brown; Smith *v.* Smith.

MARY

If anything dreadful should happen to you—like divorce or disgrace—you can always come to me. I'll stand by you. But it won't—oh, Peter, please tell me it won't.

CLERGYMAN

I should never have thought it possible! I always looked on Peter Ulric Smith as such a nice young fellow.

BRIDE

I want you to marry Tony and me. I shouldn't feel properly married if I wasn't married in a church!

BUSINESS MAN

Send in Smith! Smith, you're sacked! We don't want any divorcees here.

SCHOOLMASTER

You must admit a thing like that lets down the school. And I'm told he even wore the old-boy tie in court!

BUSINESS MAN

You say you weren't the guilty party really? It was a white lie, was it? Well, what's that got to do with me?

I told you to lie? May be. But this is the wrong sort of lie, my boy. I've got my reputation to think of—and you can get out and stay out!

ANNOUNCER

The total number of unemployed at noon to-day was four millions——

BUSINESS MAN

That's my last word. You're fired!

ANNOUNCER

—and sixty-seven. I beg your pardon, sixty-eight. The election. Speaking in London to-day, the Prime Minister said——

[Out of the shadows comes the voice of the POLITICIAN, and at once a convenient flicker of light picks him out for us.]

POLITICIAN

My friends, this is a very solemn moment for all of us. The twin spectres of poverty and unemployment menace the security of our fair land. Even the richest among us can never be sure when falling dividends and rising taxes may not force us to dismiss our second chauffeur or third gardener.

MARY

Don't worry about being rich, my precious. Money isn't everything.

POLITICIAN

There is only one way out of this dilemma. We must take what we want, as our fathers took it—and if the world refuses to give freely, then we must take it by force. Our virile young men and women are not going to be denied. They are not going to fall below the high standards of their forefathers. Read our glorious history, and you will find on every page an epic of heroism, a

saga of glory, written in letters of blood and fire. That is the message I bring to you to-day.

MARY

Money doesn't matter. It's peace that counts. Peace is the only thing in life worth having.

POLITICIAN

This is a democratic country, and I thank God for it. The decision rests with you. You alone shall provide the answer. Pale peace with poverty in her train—or glorious war with work for men and honour for our nation?

SCHOOLMASTER

History provides the answer. It must be war!

CLERGYMAN

When right is on our side war becomes holy—an act of devotion to God!

BUSINESS MAN

Trade follows the flag. Give me war and profits!

MARY

It's peace that counts. Peace is the only thing in life worth having.

ANNOUNCER

War has been declared!

[All of the characters except MARY cheer loudly. From this point onward the speeches follow one another more and more quickly, getting louder every moment, creating an air of tension and excitement.]

POLITICIAN

War has been declared!

ALL

WAR HAS BEEN DECLARED!

ANNOUNCER

The royal trumpeters will now sound the advance. Stand by, please.

POLITICIAN

Men are urgently needed. We must have more men.

SCHOOLMASTER

I'm needed at home to teach the new generation about the glories of war.

CLERGYMAN

My place is to preach that this is a holy war—not to fight it.

BUSINESS MAN

Anyone can fight, but it needs a man like me to see that we make a profit out of the war.

POLITICIAN

Men are urgently needed. We must have more men.

ANNOUNCER

Men are urgently needed.

POLITICIAN

Peter Ulric Smith, your king and country need *you*.

ANNOUNCER

Peter Ulric Smith, your king and country need *you*.

POLITICIAN

For the glorious destiny of your nation——

SCHOOLMASTER

For the honour of the old school——

CLERGYMAN

For the carrying out of God's immutable purposes——

BUSINESS MAN

For the sake of the profit-and-loss account——

ALL

Your king and country need *you*.

MARY

No, no! They'd never send you to war! They'd never do that, Peter! Never again!

ANNOUNCER

Here is the latest bulletin from the front. There was a sharp engagement in Zone 24 this morning. Casualties were heavy, but neither side could claim any material advantage.

POLITICIAN

We're doing splendidly. I am confident that victory is in sight.

SCHOOLMASTER

Our brave boys are performing wonders.

CLERGYMAN

With God on our side we cannot fail.

BUSINESS MAN

Already our turnover has doubled.

ANNOUNCER

Here is the first casualty-list of to-day's engagement. Killed, Peter Ulric Smith——

POLITICIAN

Peter Ulric Smith! Dear, dear! A fine boy! Send a telegram of condolence to his mother.

SCHOOLMASTER

Peter Ulric Smith! Write his name on the war memorial! What a tribute to the training of the old school! Fourteen of our boys have laid down their lives already.

CLERGYMAN

Peter Ulric Smith! Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life.

BUSINESS MAN

Peter Ulric Smith! He used to work for me, but this is the best day's work he ever did. I mean to say, look at my dividends.

ANNOUNCER

The royal trumpeters will now sound the Last Post.

[During these speeches MARY has risen to her feet, and she is now standing, facing the other characters. She is trembling, and suddenly she shouts:]

MARY

No! You shan't do it! Stop it, I tell you! Stop it!

ALL

What?

MARY *[shrieking]*

Stop!

ALL

Stop?

MARY

Yes, stop! It mustn't be like that! It mustn't! Is that what I've suffered agonies for? Is that the best you can give my son? If that's all the world can offer, then I'd rather kill him now—before he's had time to learn what a mockery it all is. I'd rather kill him, I tell you, than let him grow up—for that! I won't have it, I tell you! Do you hear that? I won't have it! *[All of the other characters begin to laugh derisively. MARY listens hopelessly for a moment. Then she shouts, despairingly.]* Stop it! Stop it! *[The baby in the cradle begins to cry.]* There! Now you've wakened him.

[She turns and picks up the child. Holding him in her arms, she turns again—to find that the others have all gone. In their place stands the MADONNA, a sad-faced, soft-voiced woman, dressed in a blue robe.]

MADONNA

There! It's all right.

MARY

Who are you?

MADONNA

Just a mother, like yourself.

MARY

Where's your baby?

MADONNA

They killed him.

MARY

Oh! [*She clutches her own baby more closely to her breast.*]

MADONNA

But you mustn't be afraid. I came to reassure you.

MARY

How can I help being afraid? Didn't you hear what they said—that all my baby could look forward to was lying and cheating and despair and unhappiness and bloodshed and death? Wouldn't you be afraid?

MADONNA [*peeping at the baby*]

But he isn't afraid. Look, he's smiling.

MARY

That's because he doesn't know. Oh, it was cruel of me to bring a baby into a world like this! I ought never to have done it.

MADONNA

You say that because you haven't learned the true secret of motherhood.

MARY

What is that?

MADONNA

You have to find that out for yourself. It's a strange thing, motherhood. You may be just an ordinary woman—not particularly clever or wise or beautiful—but your baby may be a genius, a great musician, or a poet, or a leader of men. You have to teach him everything—how to eat and how to walk, how to dress and

how to talk—and before you know what is happening he is teaching you. Things you'd never dreamed of he will teach you. That's the strange thing about babies. They have something in them that doesn't come from you at all, but from outside. And that's the secret of motherhood—that something which makes every baby a potential leader and saviour of mankind. One day some mother somewhere will give the world a child who will put everything right. It may be you—or another mother across the street — or across the world. But whoever it is, she won't know — any more than you or I knew. Look at my Son, for instance——

MARY

But they killed him, you said.

MADONNA

That didn't make any difference.

MARY

No difference! I don't want my son killed.

MADONNA

He said, "I will come again." And I believe that He will—in some other mother's child. And perhaps this time the world will be ready for Him. Perhaps it is ready now, for yours——

MARY

Is *that* the secret you spoke of?

MADONNA

Perhaps.

MARY

It's too much to hope.

MADONNA

Why? Isn't all motherhood hope?

MARY

But my baby——

MADONNA [*peeping at him again*]
He's still awake.

MARY

I'll put him to bed.

[She goes over to the cradle, puts the baby into it, and tucks it up. Then she sits down by it again, in the same position as when the play opened, and begins to rock the cradle gently to and fro. The MADONNA stands just beyond the cradle, looking out into the distance, and as MARY begins to sing her lullaby again we can almost imagine that the MADONNA is gently rocking an invisible child in her arms too.]

MARY [*singing*]

Hush-a-bye, baby, on the tree-top.

When the wind blows the cradle will rock.

When the bough breaks the cradle will fall.

Down will come baby, cradle, and all.

[She peeps at the baby to see if he is sleeping.]

Then she sings, more softly.

Hush-a-bye, baby, on the tree-top.

When the wind blows the cradle will rock.

When the bough breaks——

[MARY is still singing as the curtain slowly falls.]

[illegible]

HUSBANDS SUPPLIED

A FARCE

By FALKLAND L. CARY

This play shared the first prize (with Harry Penson's
Love and Cousin Albert) at the Harrogate Festival 1935

Adjudicator: JOHN BOURNE

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Falkland L. Cary*

CHARACTERS

MRS MAY, *proprietress of the*
 "Husbands Supplied" Bureau

MISS JONES, *her assistant*

MRS WUFF

MRS BEE

MISS WAFF

MISS CRUNCH

AN OLD LADY

THE MAN

} *Demand*

Supply

Applications regarding performances of this play should be addressed to Play Rights and Publications, Ltd., Maltravers House, Arundel Street, London, W.C.2, or The Baker International Play Bureau, 178 Tremont Street, Boston, U.S.A.

MISS JONES

And the third?

MRS MAY

Oh, the third was a lonely bachelor who couldn't get his socks mended, and so I called him 'Charity.'

MISS JONES

And they all went west?

MRS MAY

Yes. 'Faith' got killed in a motor accident when he was driving the car with his right hand and making love to some one else's wife with his left.

MISS JONES

That must be very difficult to do.

MRS MAY

Not at all. 'Faith' was left-handed. 'Hope' got scalded to death when his hot-water bottle burst.

MISS JONES

Oh, madam, how tragic!

MRS MAY

Tragic! I should think so, indeed! A brand-new hot-water bottle!

MISS JONES

And 'Charity'?

MRS MAY

'Charity,' I regret to say, had the stupidity and inconsiderateness to swallow a whole packet of weed-killer, after I had spent a good hour trying to persuade him to come to a bargain sale with me.

MISS JONES

My goodness! What was he doing with the weed-killer.

MRS MAY [*darkly*]

I often wondered. We hadn't a garden.

MISS JONES

I don't quite understand how you run the bureau, madam.

MRS MAY

It's quite simple. When you want a maid, or when you lose a maid, what do you do? Go to the bureau and get another. Well, it's the same thing here. If you want a husband or lose a husband come along here, put your name down, and state your requirements. Fee, one guinea per husband, and no responsibility taken for subsequent proceedings—legal or otherwise.

MISS JONES

My! And do you get a lot of ladies here looking for husbands?

MRS MAY

Thousands of them. Big ones—little ones—fat ones—thin ones—young ones—old ones—pretty ones—and ones as ugly as the devil. There's always a shortage of good maids, and there's always a shortage of husbands, good or bad. Now don't forget your duty is to write down particulars of clients and the sort of husbands they want in that big ledger.

[There is a loud knocking at the door.]

MRS MAY

Ah! An early bird after a worm. Show her in. *[Enter MRS WUFF—furs, accent, scent, more furs, and more accent.]*
Good morning, madam.

MRS WUFF

Good morning.

MRS MAY

What can I do for you?

MRS WUFF

Well, what I really want is a husband.

MRS MAY

I can see that. Will you kindly give my assistant the full particulars—name, age (approximately, of course), description, nature, requirements?

MRS WUFF

Lucretia Wuff—Mrs Wuff. I am a widow.

MRS MAY

Oh! Divorced, bigamist, or grass?

MRS WUFF

Well, certainly not grass.

MRS MAY

Not grass! Hard court, eh? Put that down, Miss Jones. Your age?

MRS WUFF

Well, thirty-five.

MRS MAY

Thirty-five, Miss Jones, plus fifteen.

MRS WUFF

What do you mean by plus fifteen? I am not fifty.

MRS MAY

Oh, no, madam. That's not your age; that's your handicap. What sort of husband do you wish for?

MRS WUFF

Oh, something exciting.

MRS MAY

Something exciting? Ahem! Put her down as an optimist, Miss Jones. And his age?

MRS WUFF

Oh, about twenty-three or twenty-four.

MRS MAY

Twenty-three or twenty-four. Put down baby-snatcher after optimist. And now, habits?

MRS WUFF [*turns up R.*]

Oh, I'm not particular. He must dance well, of course, and mix cocktails, and not want to go to bed too early, and be able to play jazz, and know something about racing, and be able to act and swim, and drive a car, and play a decent hand at bridge, and——

[*Returns up L.*]

MRS MAY

Have you got all that, Miss Jones?

MISS JONES

Yes, madam. He must be able to dance well, play a decent hand at jazz, and not want to mix cocktails in bed.

[*There is another knock at the door.*]

MRS WUFF

Do you think that is—a man?

MRS MAY

Judging from the boldness of the knock, I should say no! [*She opens the door and admits MRS BEE.*] What, you again, Mrs Bee? I'm afraid I haven't anything to suit you.

[*MRS BEE is slight and young, wearing dark spectacles, a muffler, and a long coat.*]

MRS BEE [*in a timid voice*]

I know, but may I come in and wait, please? Some one might turn up.

MRS MAY

Certainly, Mrs Bee. Come in.

[*MRS BEE walks to the chair R.*]

MRS BEE

Thank you.

MRS WUFF [*turning round*]

I presume, Mrs May, that I have an option on whatever man turns up first?

MRS MAY

I couldn't guarantee anything of that sort. Will you sit down, madam?

MRS WUFF

Thank you.

[There is another knock at the door.]

MRS WUFF

MRS BEE

Ah!

[MRS MAY is now behind the desk. MISS JONES goes towards the door, at which all are looking. Enter MISS WAFF. She is a tall, gaunt young woman, whose outlook on the world is not biased by an undue proportion of good looks.]

MRS MAY

Good morning.

MISS WAFF *[heavily]*

Good morning. I have been advised to take a husband.

MRS MAY

Advised? By whom? Your doctor?

MISS WAFF

No, by my clergyman.

MRS MAY

The wicked old gentleman!

MRS WUFF

Disgusting!

MRS MAY

And what sort of husband do you require, madam?

MISS WAFF

I don't mind. Only one thing is important. He must be a man with a soul.

MRS MAY

A what?

MISS WAFF

A soul.

MRS MAY

What sort of a soul?

MISS WAFF [*again heavily*]

A soul that craves for the wide, open spaces—the rustling of trees in the moonlight, and the perfume of roses in early June. Have you any husbands free at the moment?

MRS MAY

Not any souley ones.

MISS WAFF

Perhaps I had better call again.

[She moves towards the door.]

MRS MAY

Your best chance, madam, would be to sit and wait. Something with a soul might blow in. I had one last week, but he was snapped up in no time by a lady who kept a lodging-house in Brighton. My assistant will take all particulars. Miss Jones! [*MISS WAFF moves over to the desk.*] Now, Mrs Bee, you've been coming every day for the last month. What sort of husband do you really want? A soul or a thriller?

MRS BEE [*hesitatingly*]

Oh, just any sort of a husband. I'll tell you if one comes in who would suit me.

MRS WUFF

I should warn you, madam, that I have a prior claim to you on any man this morning.

MISS JONES

That's all, thank you.

MRS MAY

Will you sit down, Miss Waff?

[MISS WAFF takes a seat on the other side of MRS WUFF.]

MRS WUFF [*aggressively*]

You get all sorts here, don't you?

MRS MAY

It takes all sorts to make a marriage.

[Another knock. All the ladies stiffen at once. The knock is repeated.]

ALL

Ah!

MRS MAY

Come in.

[A tall, gaunt, and rugged spinster enters. She is dressed in rusty black; an evil and sombre toque almost, but, alas! not entirely, eclipses her countenance. She takes a severe and assured glance round the room, sniffs, and then walks to the counter.]

MISS JONES

Yes, madam?

MISS CRUNCH

Are you the proprietress? I said, "Are you the proprietress?"

MISS JONES

Oh, no, ma'am!

MRS MAY

I am Mrs May. What can I do for you?

MISS CRUNCH

I have called for a husband.

MRS MAY

Oh, yes! Your own or some one else's?

MISS CRUNCH

I am not married.

MRS MAY

And what is your name?

MISS CRUNCH

Crunch.

MRS MAY

I beg your pardon?

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "Crunch."

MRS MAY

Miss Jones, take down Miss Crunch's particulars.

MISS JONES

Name, please?

MISS CRUNCH

Crunch—Sarah Crunch.

MISS JONES

Scarrah Scrunch. Thank you. Age?

MISS CRUNCH

Forty-one. *[An audible titter from the listening ladies.]*

MISS JONES

Spinster?

MISS CRUNCH

Certainly.

MISS JONES

Nature?

MRS MAY

The answer is a lemon, Miss Jones.

MISS JONES

Thank you. Lemon spinster. What sort of a husband do you require, madam?

MISS CRUNCH

A worker. I said, "A worker." Have you any husbands in now?

MRS MAY

No, madam, but one may turn up any moment now.

Will you take a seat?

[MISS CRUNCH sits beside MISS WAFF.]

MISS WAFF

I find this waiting extremely unpleasant.

MRS WUFF

Waiting for a husband is always unpleasant.

MISS CRUNCH

Stuff and nonsense!

MRS WUFF

I beg your pardon [*with great dignity*]?

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "Stuff and nonsense."

MRS WUFF

And was that observation addressed to me?

[*Again there is a knock on the door. This is listened to in dead silence, and then it is repeated.*]

ALL

Ah!

[*The door is opened, and a little old lady comes in, rosy-cheeked and dressed in a manner suggestive of the country.*]

OLD LADY [*peeping in*]

I understand one can hire a husband here.

MRS WUFF

Well, my goodness!

MISS CRUNCH

Upon my word!

MRS BEE

Oh, dear me!

MISS WAFF

Revolting!

MISS JONES

Well, I never! [*The ladies all speak together. Clamour.*]

MRS MAY

Not *hire*, madam—not *hire*, please.

OLD LADY

I am very sorry. Perhaps there has been some mistake?
I was told——

MRS WUFF

You don't *hire* husbands.

OLD LADY

I beg your pardon. Perhaps I should have said I wanted
to *buy* a husband?

MRS MAY

You can *engage* a husband, if you wish.

OLD LADY

Ah! 'Engage'—that's the word I should have used.
Well, may I have one?

MRS MAY

One what?

OLD LADY

One husband.

MRS MAY

All these ladies are waiting for a husband. Perhaps you
will wait with them?

OLD LADY

Oh, dear! Will I have to wait? Don't you keep them
in stock?

MRS MAY

In stock!

OLD LADY

Dear! Dear! Dear! Dear! Have I said something
wrong again?

MRS MAY

This is not a grocer's shop, madam.

OLD LADY

No, indeed, I'm sure it isn't.

MRS MAY

Will you give my assistant the particulars, please?

OLD LADY

Well, you see, I just want a husband.

MRS MAY [*with heavy sarcasm*]

Any particular shape or size?

OLD LADY

No, I don't think so. I think I'd like a big one.

MISS WAFF

A big one!

OLD LADY

With blue eyes.

MISS CRUNCH

With blue eyes!

OLD LADY

I beg your pardon?

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "With blue eyes."

OLD LADY

So you want one with blue eyes too? They're so honest, aren't they, dear?

MRS WUFF

This is getting beyond a joke. I'm not going to waste my time here any longer. [*To the OLD LADY*] Are you really telling us that you have come here to look for a husband?

OLD LADY

But haven't you?

MRS WUFF

That's a different thing altogether.

OLD LADY

But why? I don't understand.

MRS WUFF

At your age you shouldn't want a husband. At my age it's quite different.

MISS CRUNCH

That's a good one.

MRS WUFF [*to* MISS CRUNCH]

How dare you!

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "That's a good one."

MRS MAY [*to the* OLD LADY]

Won't you sit down, madam?

OLD LADY

Thank you. [*To* MRS WUFF] I'll sit by you, dear, if I may?

MRS WUFF

I suppose I can't stop you. But I think all this is perfectly ridiculous. [*Another knock at the door.*]

ALL

Ah!

OLD LADY

Now I wonder if that might be a man?

[*The knock is repeated.*]

MRS MAY

Come in.

[*The door is opened, and a hand is put round the door, and a newspaper flung on the floor.*]

BOY'S VOICE

Your paper, mum.

[*MISS JONES sadly picks up the paper and looks at it.*]

MISS JONES

Daily Mail.

MISS CRUNCH [*delivering herself of a stupendous joke*]
Daily Mail! Why, that's what we're waiting for.

[*This is received in stony silence.*]

MISS CRUNCH [*in paroxysms*]

I said, "That's what we're all waiting for."

MISS WAFF

If that is meant as a joke I consider it extremely vulgar.

MRS WUFF

Disgusting!

OLD LADY [*suddenly laughing*]

Of course, daily male. I see it now.

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "That's what we're all waiting for."

MRS MAY

And very good too.

[*They all laugh, except MRS WUFF and MISS WAFF.*]

MRS WUFF

As I said before, this is all perfectly ridiculous. I have come here to find a husband, and I find a room of sniggering women.

MISS WAFF

I beg your pardon. I wasn't sniggering. How dare you say such a thing!

MISS CRUNCH

She'd dare anything.

MRS MAY

Now, then, ladies, ladies, please.

MISS CRUNCH

I said——

[*But again there is a knocking at the door, and all the ladies stiffen.*]

ALL

Ah!

MISS WAFF

Is that one?

MRS MAY [*holding up her hand for silence*]

Ssh! [*The knocking—very timid, deprecatory knocking—is repeated.*] That's one. Come in.

[*The door opens slowly, and THE MAN comes in. He is—whatever you like, and of the same age, and dressed in the same way. Obviously he is in a new and rather strange situation, but he is going to make the best of it.*]

MRS MAY

Miss Jones, please shut the door behind the gentleman [*in a whisper*]*—and lock it.*

[*THE MAN turns round as this manœuvre is completed, and then moves a few steps into the room.*]

THE MAN

Excuse me—but are any of you ladies looking for a husband? [*The ladies rise as one lady.*]

ALL

Yes.

[*THE MAN rapidly surveys them, and then hurriedly turns to the door.*]

THE MAN

Oh! I think I'll call another day.

MISS CRUNCH

Stop!

THE MAN

I beg your pardon?

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "Stop."

THE MAN [*hastening away*]

No! I don't think I will, thank you.

MRS MAY

Are you looking for a wife?

THE MAN

I was—but it doesn't matter now. [*He tries the door.*]
What's the matter with this door? Why, it's locked!
[*He looks round in angry surprise, and his eye lights on MISS JONES.*] You locked it. I saw you.

MISS JONES

Ooo-er, what a frightful story!

THE MAN

You know you did. I can see the key in your hand.

MISS JONES

I wouldn't give up that key, not if you were to throttle me to death.

THE MAN

I haven't the faintest wish to throttle you to death. But will you kindly open that door?

MRS MAY

If we do open the door, will you go away?

THE MAN

Certainly.

MRS MAY

Then we won't open it.

MRS WUFF

You came here to get a wife, and you'll have to have one. Personally, I should advise you take the one you like the look of best.

THE MAN

This sounds remarkably like intimidation.

OLD LADY

Come in again, young man. You're quite safe.

THE MAN

I should feel safer with the door open.

MRS MAY

Won't you sit down, Mr——

[*Places chair in centre. All sit.*]

THE MAN

Smith.

MRS MAY

Miss Jones, open that door. Now, Mr Smith, I am the proprietress of "Husbands Supplied." I understand that you are in need of a situation.

THE MAN

Well, I certainly came here to look for a wife.

MRS MAY

I can promise you we will have no difficulty in suiting you. Will you draw up your chairs, ladies?

[A semicircle is formed round THE MAN. MRS WUFF attempts to get her chair in between that of MISS CRUNCH and THE MAN. MISS CRUNCH is having none of it.]

MISS CRUNCH

No, you don't.

MRS WUFF

Kindly make room for me.

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "No, you don't."

MRS MAY

Now, ladies, please.

[MISS CRUNCH slips her chair round left of THE MAN.]

OLD LADY *[to MISS WAFF]*

My dear, do you mind telling me what colour eyes he's got? I don't see from here. *[MISS WAFF leaves the circle and gazes intently into THE MAN'S eyes.]* Blue?

MISS WAFF

Deep Mediterranean blue.

MISS CRUNCH

Go away!

MISS WAFF

Are you addressing me?

MISS CRUNCH

Yes. I said, "Go away!"

MISS WAFF [*returning to her seat*]

What rudeness!

MRS MAY

If any of you ladies would like to ask the applicant any questions——

MISS CRUNCH

Eat cheese?

THE MAN

I beg your pardon?

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "Eat cheese?"

THE MAN [*a little taken aback*]

Yes, I eat cheese.

MISS CRUNCH

Drink beer?

THE MAN

Yes, occasionally.

MISS CRUNCH

Pints or gallons?

THE MAN

Pints as a rule [*politely*].

MRS WUFF

Can you dance?

THE MAN

A little.

MRS WUFF

Tango?

THE MAN

Indifferently.

Q

MISS WAFF

Do you read?

THE MAN

Yes.

MISS WAFF

What?

THE MAN

Daily Mail.

MISS CRUNCH

Daily Mail? That's a good one.

THE MAN

I don't quite understand.

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "That's a good one." Smoke tobacco?

THE MAN

Yes.

MISS CRUNCH

Clean about the house?

THE MAN

I hope so.

MRS WUFF

And now about your references.

THE MAN

References?

MRS WUFF

Yes. Previous employer?

MRS MAY

The lady wants to know, have you been married before?

THE MAN

Yes.

MISS CRUNCH

Often?

THE MAN

No.

MISS WAFF

Is she alive?

MISS CRUNCH

Are *they* alive?

THE MAN

I don't know.

MRS WUFF

Ah, a bigamist! This sounds interesting.

MISS WAFF

Are you a bigamist?

OLD LADY

What is a bigamist, my dears?

MRS MAY

A man who makes two bites at a cherry.

OLD LADY

I don't at all understand what a bigamist is yet.

MISS CRUNCH

A damn' fool!

MRS MAY

Miss Crunch! Miss Crunch!

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "Damn' fool." [To THE MAN] Gambler?

THE MAN

No.

MISS WAFF

You haven't answered the question yet. Are you a bigamist?

THE MAN

No.

MISS WAFF

Then what happened to your first wife?

THE MAN

Separated.

MISS WAFF

Divorced?

THE MAN

That sort of thing.

OLD LADY

May I ask a few questions?

MRS MAY

Certainly.

OLD LADY

Are you sober, honest, and truthful?

THE MAN

Yes, I think so.

MISS CRUNCH

All three?

THE MAN

Yes.

MISS CRUNCH

Bosh!

MRS WUFF

You must understand that if I engage you I shall expect you to take an interest in things I am interested in.

MISS CRUNCH

Men?

MRS WUFF

I beg your pardon?

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "Men?"

MRS WUFF [*to THE MAN*]

Kindly stand up. [*THE MAN does so.*] Turn round.
[*He does so.*]

MISS CRUNCH

Teeth. [*He shows his teeth.*] Your own or somebody else's?

THE MAN

All my own.

OLD LADY

Do you take cold easily, dear?

THE MAN

No.

MRS WUFF

Thank you. You may sit down.

MRS MAY

Any other question, ladies?

MISS CRUNCH

No need for questions. I'll take him.

MISS WAFF

You'll do nothing of the sort.

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "I'll take him."

MISS WAFF

As a matter of fact, I shall engage him.

MISS CRUNCH

I said——

MRS WUFF

There is no need to argue about it. I have already chosen him.

MISS CRUNCH [*standing up*]

Come along.

THE MAN

But——

MRS WUFF [*seizing him too*]

Kindly let my husband go.

MISS WAFF

Your husband! I have already engaged him.

THE MAN

But, ladies, really——

OLD LADY

Now, my dears, you can't all take him. And to save any argument, I am going to have him myself.

MISS CRUNCH

Rubbish!

MRS WUFF

Ridiculous!

MISS WAFF

Absurd! *[The ladies all speak together. Clamour.]*

MISS CRUNCH

Come along, now.

MRS WUFF

I tell you, I——

MISS WAFF

I'm not going to——

OLD LADY

There's no use trying——

[They all speak together again.]

MRS MAY

Ladies, be quiet, all of you—and sit down. *[They all subside.]* Please remember that this is my office. There need be no further argument. I have decided to engage him myself.

ALL

What?

MRS MAY

That is all, ladies. The bureau is closed for the day.

MISS CRUNCH

Robber! I said, "You're a robber."

MRS WUFF

You needn't think we're going to let you get away with him.

MRS MAY

Miss Jones, I expect you to stand by me.

MISS JONES [*fumbling in her bag*]

Here you are. It's a guinea, isn't it?

MRS MAY

What's a guinea?

MISS JONES

The fee. I don't see why I shouldn't have him myself. I'm younger than any of you.

MISS CRUNCH

Liar!

THE MAN

May I be allowed to say a word?

MISS CRUNCH

I know. You want me. Come along!

MRS MAY

Let him go.

THE MAN

Ladies, may I be allowed to say a word? Since you can't all have me, why shouldn't I choose the one I like best?

MRS WUFF

Good gracious! Fancy a man choosing his wife!

THE MAN

I know it's not done nowadays, but I don't see any other way out of the difficulty.

MISS CRUNCH

Man's right. Sit down.

[MISS CRUNCH *sits*.]

MRS MAY

Well, perhaps there's something in the idea?

[MRS MAY sits.]

THE MAN

Are you all agreed? [*They nod assent.*] Good! Then won't you all sit down? [*They sit down.*] Good again! [*There is a pause.*]

MISS CRUNCH

Well! I'm still here. I said, "I'm still here."

[*There is no answer, and the others signal to her to be silent.*]

MISS WAFF

Will you be silent and allow him to make up his mind?

MRS WUFF [*smiling at him*]

I don't think there will be any difficulty about that.

THE MAN

But you haven't told me yet what each of you has to offer me.

MRS MAY

Well, I never!

MISS CRUNCH

Man's right. I'll begin. I——

MISS WAFF

I can——

MRS WUFF

With me——

OLD LADY

If you——

MISS JONES

I know——

MRS MAY

I offer——

[*The ladies all speak together. Clamour*]

THE MAN

Wouldn't it be better if you all spoke separately?
Supposing you all spoke in order from the right?

MRS MAY

Very well. Mrs Bee?

MRS BEE [*nervously*]

Oh, I think I'll leave it to you, ladies.

MRS MAY

Good! Mrs Wuff?

MRS WUFF

I can offer you all that the others can—and something else.

MISS CRUNCH

Hey? What's that? I said, "What's that?"

THE MAN

Don't interrupt, please.

MRS WUFF [*intensely*]

I can offer you—companionship.

MISS CRUNCH

That's a good one. I said, "That's a good one."

MRS MAY

Time's up. Next, please.

MISS WAFF

I can offer you something infinitely bigger—something that transcends to oblivion and brings the joy of infinity.
I can bring you——

MISS CRUNCH

Spit it out!

MRS MAY

Silence, please.

MISS CRUNCH

I said——

[*But here THE MAN fortunately places his open hand across her mouth.*]

MISS WAFF

I can bring you—love.

MISS CRUNCH

Well, I never! That's a better one. I said, "That's a better one."

MRS MAY

Will you be quiet, please? It's your turn now. What can you offer?

MISS CRUNCH [*without a moment's hesitation*]

Beer and victuals.

THE MAN

Beer and what?

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "Beer and victuals."

MRS MAY

Is that all?

MISS CRUNCH

Quite enough.

MRS MAY

Very well, then. Miss Jones, since you insist on regarding yourself as a client——

MISS JONES

I can offer you—my heart.

MISS CRUNCH

Better have beer and victuals.

MRS MAY

Is that all? Very well, then. I will speak last. I can offer you a good home and house and a share in this office. Now, then. Choose.

OLD LADY

Just a moment. You seem to have forgotten me.

MRS MAY

Oh, you're still playing, are you? Very well, then.

OLD LADY

I can offer you half—just exactly half a little farmhouse fifteen miles outside Maidstone, in Kent. The river runs through the bottom of the meadow in front of the house, and the meadow is gay with orchids and bryony—white bryony and black—and willow throstle, and the sun sets at the back through the orchard and throws long black shadows on the ground. And if you like beer, why, remember we grow hops in Kent.

MRS MAY

Is that all? Now—choose.

[THE MAN *thinks for a moment. Then walks up and down a few steps in front of them.*]

THE MAN

Do you know, I find it impossible to make up my mind. You are all so attractive—and in so many ways. The beauty of Colette, charm of Mignonette, grace of Antoinette, in you arrayed. Must I refuse you all because I admire you all?

MISS CRUNCH

I'm still here.

THE MAN

Yes, I know.

MISS CRUNCH

Well?

THE MAN

A moment, please. Let me think. Let me see. There are [*counting*] one, two, three, four, five, six, seven of you, and there are seven days of the week.

MISS CRUNCH

There's only five of them as well as me. She [*pointing to MRS BEE*] isn't in it.

THE MAN

Six of you. Why, that makes it even better. Supposing, now, you six were to share me?

ALL

Share you!

THE MAN

Yes. I should be husband of the first on the first day of the week, the second on the second, and so on. You see, in that way I should enjoy—companionship on Mondays, love on Tuesdays, beer and—wasn't it victuals—on Wednesdays, this lady's heart on Thursdays, the bureau on Fridays, and that delightful meadow at Maidstone on Saturdays.

MISS CRUNCH

And what would you do on Sundays?

THE MAN

Sunday, my dear lady, is a day of rest.

MISS WAFF

Well, I think it is the most abominable suggestion I have ever heard! He isn't a bigamist: he's a Mormon!

MRS MAY

Scandalous and disgraceful!

MRS WUFF

Intolerable! Haven't you eyes in your head, man?

MISS JONES [*regretfully*]

I am afraid my people would never allow me.

MRS MAY

The whole thing's impossible.

ALL

Absolutely.

MRS MAY

Ladies, I propose that we adjourn to the other room and discuss this matter in private. Some arrangement will have to be made unless we all want to lose him.

MISS CRUNCH

You go away and discuss, and I'll watch him.

MRS WUFF

I wouldn't trust that woman with any man.

MISS WAFF

Certainly not!

MRS MAY

I know. Mrs Bee, you are not interested in this gentleman?

MRS BEE

I—what? Oh, no, of course not! Why should I be?

MRS MAY

Very well. We will lock the outer door and give you the key, while we all arrange the affair in the other room. You stay here with him, and if he attempts to take the key from you—scream [*locking the door and giving the key to MRS BEE*].

MRS BEE

But I—

MRS MAY

Will that do, ladies?

MISS WAFF

I think it is an excellent idea.

MRS WUFF

Certainly.

MRS MAY

Come along, then.

[She opens the door to the room, and the ladies file out—MISS JONES first, then the OLD LADY, who blows a kiss to THE MAN, then MISS WAFF, followed by MRS WUFF.]

MISS CRUNCH [*to MRS BEE*]

Now, then, no monkey tricks! I said, "No monkey tricks!"

[She goes out, followed by MRS MAY, and the two are left alone.]

THE MAN *[walking to the outer door]*

God, what a mess! *[Trying the door]* Locked all right. *[MRS BEE holds up the key.]* I wonder if there is anything I can do to persuade you to let me get out of this damned place? You see, it's all been a mistake.

MRS BEE *[still in her timid voice]*

No mistake. You wanted a wife—you'll get a wife—several wives—six of them.

THE MAN

But you don't understand. I didn't come here to get a wife. I came to look for——

MRS BEE

Some one else's wife, I expect.

THE MAN

Not some one else's—my own.

MRS BEE

What?

THE MAN

Oh, it's a long, sordid story. I can't possibly tell you all of it.

MRS BEE

Tell me the spicy bits.

THE MAN

There—there aren't any spicy bits.

MRS BEE

Sit down and tell me.

THE MAN

Will you let me out if I do?

MRS BEE

I might. Sit down. Now——

THE MAN

Well, you see, we were only married two years when I suppose I got worried over work, or careless, or something, and we——

MRS BEE

Quarrelled.

THE MAN

Yes. About something silly. And from bad it got to worse; and then one day she left me.

MRS BEE

Go on.

THE MAN

That's all.

MRS BEE

That's very little. Didn't you try to get her to come back?

THE MAN

That's it. I couldn't. I didn't know where she had gone to.

MRS BEE

Did you look for her?

THE MAN

Everywhere.

MRS BEE

Hadn't she gone back to her mother and father?

THE MAN

She hadn't a mother or father.

MRS BEE

Dear me! What a convenient sort of wife to have! But still I don't understand what you were doing in here, looking for another wife?

THE MAN

I wasn't. I was looking for her. I thought she might be

looking for another husband. Now, please, will you let me go? [*From the back MISS CRUNCH's voice is heard.*]

MISS CRUNCH

I'll have him. I say, "I'll have him."

[*The voice is almost drowned in a shriek of protest from the others.*]

THE MAN

For mercy's sake, let me go before That comes back!

MRS BEE

Certainly not. I had hoped that there might be something good in your story, but now it turns out that you are nothing more than a bad-tempered husband, and you deserve all you get.

THE MAN

But you promised——

[*Here the door is flung open, and MISS CRUNCH enters, followed by the others.*]

MISS CRUNCH

That's all right. I'm to have you. I say, "I'm to have you."

MRS MAY

Come back, you brazen hussy!

MRS WUFF

Take her away from him.

MISS JONES [*entering*]

Here, fair play! Fair play!

MISS WAFF

I insist on my rights.

OLD LADY

I may be old, but I'm very tough, and I'll not give him up without a struggle.

THE MAN

Ladies! Ladies! Please let me go.

MISS CRUNCH

All settled. [To MRS BEE] Give me the key.

ALL

Don't give it to her.

MRS MAY

You can't have him. We're five to one. Now, sir, we have decided to accept your offer. We will share you.

THE MAN

My heavens! And who do I begin with?

MISS CRUNCH

Mc. Come along.

MRS BEE [*unexpectedly*]

Wait a moment.

MRS MAY

And who asked you to speak?

MRS BEE

Nobody—but he's coming home with me.

MISS CRUNCH

Dirty work! Dirty work! You shouldn't have left them together.

MRS BEE

He's coming with me.

THE MAN

Well, I—

MRS BEE

You're coming with me, aren't you—Charles?

THE MAN

Charles! How do you know my name?

MRS BEE

Come over here—closer—closer. Now!

THE MAN

I'm afraid I don't understand.

R

MRS BEE [*taking off her glasses*]
Look into my eyes—Charles.

MISS CRUNCH
Don't you do anything of the sort. I know the game.
Sex appeal.

THE MAN
Phillipina! Good heavens—you!
[He seizes her in his arms.]

MISS CRUNCH [*belabouring him with an umbrella*]
Come off it! Come off it!

MRS MAY
You minx!

MISS WAFF
The basest treachery!

MRS WUFF
You intriguing woman!

THE MAN
My Phillipina!

MISS CRUNCH
What's all this about Phillipina?

THE MAN
But you don't understand.

MRS MAY
Understand what?

MRS BEE [*who is taking off her coat and muffler, and now stands revealed as a charming demoiselle of twenty-three*]
This man—is my husband!

MISS CRUNCH
Oh, my garters!

THE MAN
Yes, it's quite true.

MRS MAY
Then what were you doing here?

MRS WUFF

It's a put-up job between the two of them.

THE MAN

Ladies, I am sorry—really so very sorry—to have deceived you all, but this is my wife. You see, we quarrelled—it was all my fault—and she left me. I looked for her everywhere, and then—it struck me as possible—I might find her here.

MRS MAY [*to* MRS BEE]

And you?

MRS BEE

Well, you see, I'm afraid I wanted him to find me. And I couldn't go back myself, could I? So I just thought he might happen to come here now. So that's all.

MRS WUFF

All! And I should think that's enough! Have I spent a whole morning assisting two silly people to get married to each other again?

MRS BEE

We're awfully sorry.

MRS WUFF

I should think you are! I consider I have been shamefully deceived. [*Going to the door and speaking to* MRS MAY] As for you, madam, I shall tell all my friends how I have been treated [*her voice rises*], and I consider that your bureau is nothing more than—a sanguinary swindle.
[*She goes out.*]

MISS WAFF

I too have been deceived, and I shall go back and tell my clergyman that he'll have to marry me himself.

MISS CRUNCH

That'll serve him right. Woman's a fool! Well, game's up! I'm off.

THE MAN

But won't you let me——

MISS CRUNCH

I said, "Game's up!" [*Going to the door*] No fool like an old fool. I'll buy a Pekinese instead. Good-bye.

OLD LADY

Well, my dears, I hope you'll be very happy.

MRS BEE

That's just sweet of you. [*Kisses her.*]

OLD LADY

Good-bye, little wife. Don't do it again. [*To THE MAN*] Good-bye, young man. Be a little wiser next time.

THE MAN

Good-bye. [*Unexpectedly he kisses the OLD LADY.*]

OLD LADY [*going to the door*]

H'mm! I hoped you'd do that. [*She goes out.*]

MRS MAY

A pretty kettle of fish. Well, you both owe me a guinea.

THE MAN [*fumbling in his pockets*]

Here you are.

MRS MAY

Ten pounds! You must be very fond of her.

THE MAN

I am.

MRS MAY

No fool like a young one! Thank you. Come along, Miss Jones. [*She goes to the inner room.*]

MISS JONES [*to MRS BEE*]

Good-bye, ma'am.

MRS BEE

Good-bye.

MISS JONES

Good-bye, sir.

THE MAN [*shaking her hand*]

Good-bye.

MISS JONES [*hesitating*]

Er—good-bye, sir.

THE MAN

Good-bye.

MISS JONES

Er—good-bye, sir.

MRS BEE

Go on, Charles.

THE MAN

Go on what?

MRS BEE

Kiss her.

THE MAN

Oh, Lord, must I?

[*He kisses her.*]

MRS MAY [*at the door*]

Miss Jones.

MISS JONES

Oh, coming, madam—coming.

[*She runs off.*]

MRS BEE

And now——

THE MAN [*coming to her*]

And now——

MRS BEE

You'll never be brutal to me again?

THE MAN

Phillipina, never! And you'll never run away from me again?

MRS BEE

Never!

THE MAN [*about to kiss her*]

Then, darling——

MRS BEE

Darling——

[*But the door is opened, and MISS CRUNCH appears.*]

MISS CRUNCH

Forgot to say, “In case of any trouble in the future, shall always be at home Wednesday nights.”

CURTAIN

[illegible]

[illegible]

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